

The girl was a stranger in town.
She didn't have any money.
She didn't have any friends.
Why did someone want her dead?

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The Stripper

by carter brown

A SIGNET BOOK

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THE CROWD ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STREET WAS thickening fast when I parked the Austin Healey outside the Starlight Hotel. It was a pleasant, lazy kind of afternoon—a hot sun in a cloudless azure sky, with a gentle breeze rolling in off the Pacific Ocean.

It was a time to laze on a beach with a bikini-unclad blonde, or sit in a shady bar and listen to the gentle clunk of ice cubes in a tall glass. A time for dreaming, when everyone felt good just to be alive—and maybe in the whole of Pine City there was only one exception. The girl stood out on a ledge fifteen stories high, getting ready to jump.

Inside the lobby a bunch of uniformed cops from the Sheriff's office kept the curious crowd clear of the elevators. I rode up to the fifteenth floor and found the right room with no trouble at all. Sergeant Polnik greeted me inside the door with a worried frown corrugating his sloping forehead.

"Lieutenant Wheeler," he said hopefully. "Cheez! I'm sure glad you got here! The Sheriff's going nuts hanging out the window and all—still trying to talk some sense into that screwball dame out there."

An agitated character with protruding eyes and a pencil line of twitching mustache thrust himself in front of the Sergeant.

"You have to stop her, Lieutenant!" he gabbled almost incoherently. "We can't have young women using our hotel for suicides—the publicity will be murder!"

"Why don't you make up your mind?" I suggested politely, then placed the flat of my hand against his chest and nudged him out of the way.

Sheriff Lavers was sitting on the sill of the open window, his back twisted painfully as he talked with the girl who stood outside on the ledge. The sight of his tight-stretched pants was tempting but I firmly resisted the impulse, out of a reluctant respect for authority and an even greater reluctance to lose the pay check I've grown used to at the end of every month.

"I guess if she didn't jump when she saw *his* face," I said loudly to nobody special, "we got nothing to worry about any more."

The Sheriff's heels jarred onto the floor, then he turned toward me, his face a mottled color.

"So you finally got here, Wheeler," he grunted. "See if you can talk any sense into that girl out there—I can't!"

"She's a psycho?" I asked.

"Not like you'd figure," he said in a worried voice. "No hysterics, no nothing. The way she's acting, you'd figure the Girl Scouts were having their annual cookout, or something!"

"Did she give you a reason for wanting to jump?"

He shook his head. "Like I said, she just don't make any sense. Her name's Patty Keller and the only thing worrying her right now is what time you've got!"

"She's not worried about how much time she's got?" I queried.

"Either way I wouldn't know," Lavers said heavily. "See what you can do with her, Wheeler."

I sat on the sill he'd recently vacated and looked out, then down—and it was a big mistake. The massed crowd on the sidewalk was only a collection of pin-heads; for a moment I watched the toy automobiles being pushed along the street by an invisible hand, then vertigo caught up with me fast. As I turned my head quickly, I saw the girl standing about six feet away with her back pressed against the outside wall. The ledge was no more than eighteen inches wide, and the gentle breeze off the ocean suddenly turned sinister as it plucked at the hem of her skirt.

She didn't look any more than twenty at most—a

thin-featured face and mousey-colored hair—and she didn't look nervous even. Her blouse was kind of sloppy and the hem of her skirt a couple of inches too long. Maybe she was a misfit like her clothes, and this was her big problem that one step forward could resolve for all time.

"Hi," she said quickly in a bright, eager-to-please voice. "I'm Patty Keller. Who are you?"

"Al Wheeler," I told her. "You're waiting for time out there, Patty, the streetcars don't come this way."

"That's very funny," she said gravely. "You're a police officer, I guess?"

"A lieutenant," I admitted. "You are a big woman or something, Patty?"

Al. I bet there's newspaper reporters and cameramen and everything—even a television camera, maybe?"

"Sure," I said. "And all of them want just one thing, Patty—for you to come back inside this window! You do that one little thing and you'll make thousands of people throughout the city feel good—make them feel life really is worth living after all!"

"What time is it?" she asked abruptly, and that did up the philosophy real neat.

"I just told you—it's almost three." I took another look at my watch. "Three on the button—and what the hell difference does it make anyway?"

It wasn't the kind of question that you expect an answer to, but for a moment she looked like ten thousand bucks *and* a vacation in Rio hung in the balance. Suddenly the frown of intense concentration cleared. She took a deep breath and for the first time smiled at me with genuine warmth.

"I guess you're right, Al," she said easily. "It would be stupid to disappoint all those people down there, wouldn't it? I'll come back inside now."

"It sure would," I said fervently. "Remember, you got all the time in the world—so just take it easy. Keep your back hard against the wall and kind of slide toward me, huh? One little step at a time will be plenty."

Patty Keller nodded, then slid her right leg toward me, keeping her back pressed taut against the wall. Her first step brought her maybe a foot closer to the window. I twisted my body around, straining toward her with my arm outstretched and that cut down the distance between us to four feet. In back of me, I felt the Sheriff's large hands clamp down onto my legs, and that made me feel a little better.

"You're doing just fine, Patty," I said. "A couple more steps and—"

She'd already taken one of them while I was talking, and was about to take the second. Her right leg slid forward again and her ankle was almost within reach

of my hand—almost. Then she moaned softly and her left leg stayed right where it was.

"O.K.," I yelled frantically. "Take a rest, honey, you got all the time in—"

Her face suddenly contorted grotesquely. Her knees seemed to buckle, and she swayed forward, then bent in the middle like a jackknife, overbalanced, and plunged. I made a desperate grab for her ankle and missed by not more than six inches, losing my balance at the same time. It was only Lavers' iron grip around my knees that saved me from falling out the window.

Her drop to the sidewalk fifteen floors below couldn't have taken more than two or three seconds. For much longer I could hear ricocheting in my head the sound that accompanied it—half moan, half scream, like something out of the primeval forests before people were born.

I got into the office around nine-thirty the next morning, and Annabelle Jackson—the Sheriff's secretary and the most likely reason I'll lose my mind—lifted her blonde head and smiled happily like I'd just broken a leg or something.

"Doctor Murphy is with the Sheriff right now," she said in her soft southern accent. "They're both waiting for you, Lieutenant, and my guess is you should have an alibi ready!"

"It's real nice of you-all, honey chile, to tip me off," I said gratefully. "One of these days I'm going to do you a big favor, like picking out my very own back plot ahead of time, so you can go spit on it whenever you feel inclined!"

"I know you're kidding, Lieutenant," she said sweetly. "I mean, who'd bury you—except the city sanitation department, maybe?"

It was a sobering thought that kept my attention all the way into the Sheriff's office, and when I saw the look on Lavers' face I obviously had that thing to think about.

"Sit down, Wheeler," he growled. "You may have a little time!"

I sat in one of the visitor's chairs and looked at Doc Murphy and he looked right back at me, so to break the monotony I looked at the Sheriff and the same thing happened.

"What are we expecting?" I ventured finally. "Fall-out?"

"Patty Keller," Lavers said, "the girl who jumped off that hotel ledge yesterday afternoon."

"She didn't jump—she fell," I corrected him. "She was on her way back inside when she got sick and—"

"You said that yesterday," he interrupted rudely. "I figured it was the usual Wheeler reaction. What female could possibly commit suicide when she was favored by a personal appearance of Nature's gift to her own sex—?"

"You're jealous, Sheriff!" I interrupted him with equal keenness. "Just because you've gotten fat and—"

"All right!" He bit the end off a cigar, then shoved the black cylinder into his face. "That was yesterday—Doctor Murphy's finished his autopsy since then."

"She fell fifteen stories onto a concrete sidewalk and you need an autopsy to establish the cause of death?" I wondered out loud.

"Why don't you concentrate real hard, Lieutenant?" Murphy asked amiably. "See if you can come up with one intelligent answer. You said she got sick and that made her fall. Expand that a little, will you—as a personal favor?"

"Since when would I want to do the mortician's friend a personal favor?" I said. "She was edging her way back to the window when she suddenly groaned—her face was all screwed up like she was in agony. Then her knees buckled and she doubled up and overbalanced. That's about all there was to it."

Murphy looked at the Sheriff and nodded wisely. "It adds up, all right."

"You two are real cute," I said coldly. "So play secrets and see if I care!"

"She kept checking on what time it was—right?" Lavers prodded.

"Yeah," I muttered. "Like morning workouts at Santa Anita. . . . Hey, come to think of it, when I told her it was three o'clock, she suddenly changed her mind about staying out on the ledge—like that!" I snapped my fingers.

"Interesting," Murphy mumbled. "She was loaded with apomorphine."

"Apomorphine? Like morphine?" I said.

"No, not like morphine at all. It's a derivative, but it's not a narcotic. It's a powerful emetic. A mere trace of it can be used as an expectorant, and as little as a twelfth of a grain makes you toss up that arsenic your wife gave you in your oatmeal—but good! It produces acute nausea, vomiting, fainting, giddiness. It's hard to say how much she'd gotten, but it was enough to do the trick."

"But why in God's name would she drink something like that when she was about to take a dive off a building?" Lavers said.

"She didn't drink it—it was a hypo. Not that it matters much, except that the timing is different," Doc Murphy explained. "It's usually given that way—in the arm, not the stomach."

"Then it certainly looks like she had a little help," I said. "Most of us don't go around sticking needles in our own arms."

"Plenty of us do!" he corrected me. "It's a cinch—as any mainliner will tell you, plus a lot of other people who have had one reason or another to give themselves shots."

"So maybe she'd eaten a bad oyster," Lavers suggested gloomily, "and she wanted to get rid of it, and she took the stuff, and then decided she was tired of living anyway, oyster or no oyster, so she tippy-toed out on the ledge and mulled it over for a while trying to make up her mind, and then *blam!*" He snorted. "Nuts! It doesn't make sense!"

"How long after the shot would it take for the reaction to hit?" I asked the doc.

He scratched his head and screwed up his face. "Pretty hard to say, for me anyway—I haven't had

any occasion to use it since I was a resident in the hospital on emergency call. About ten or fifteen minutes, maybe."

The Sheriff met my questioning look with a sour expression. "She called the desk and told them she was going to jump," he said bleakly. "They sent the house dick up there right away to see if it was a gag or not. I got there fast with Polnik—you took longer—" he gave me that one through clenched teeth "—I suppose the whole thing from the time she phoned the desk until she went down might have been fifteen minutes, give or take a couple."

"Was the hypodermic found in her room?" I asked him.

"No one was looking for it yesterday, and there's nothing there today. All she had was an empty overnight case with her—which figures, if you want to take a hotel room but plan to exit fast, by the express route!"

"When had she checked in?"

"Only a couple of hours earlier. No one with her, and no one called or went up to see her, as far as they know at the desk. She lived in a one-room apartment on the wrong side of Grenville Heights. Polnik should be checking it out right now. She only had one relative we can find so far—a cousin."

"Who's he?"

"It's a she," Lavers said morosely.

"If she's under sixty and under one-eighty pounds," Murphy said in a gleeful voice, "Wheeler will come back with a whole dossier, complete to the last birthmark—and you know where you mostly find that one?"

"You're just jealous, like the Sheriff," I told him disdainfully. "You Hippocratic hypocrite!"

Lavers encompassed both of us with a baleful glare. "The cousin's name is Dolores Keller—commonly known as *Deadpan* Dolores." He shook his head in a gesture of numb despair. "This has all the signs of a Wheeler case. I guess I should realize by now that nobody can fight Fate—right, Doctor?"

THE STRIPPER

"Deadpan Dolores?" I gurgled. "How come?"

"She's billed as the girl who says it all from the neck down," he snarled. "She's a stripper in a burlesque club."

"There comes a time in every man's life," I said in an awestricken voice, "when he's given his just reward."

"I sure hope I'm around when you get yours, Wheeler," Murphy sneered. "I'll do the autopsy for free!"

"Before you start," Lavers said resignedly, "I want that Jefferson case report finished up. How soon will you have it?"

"Sometime late this afternoon, sir," I said promptly. "But don't worry about it, I'll get right onto this new case just as soon as I'm finished with the Jefferson report—even if it means working on my own time tonight. You know me, Sheriff," I added, smiling modestly at him, "I'm conscientious!"

"I know you from way back, Wheeler," he snarled. "and there just ain't no justice!"

WHEN NIGHT HAS FALLEN OVER THE CITY AND THE neon signs blink and glitter along the boulevards, I get a moment of nostalgia here and there for the time when the world was young, and Wheeler along with it. The time when I'd stop and look at a life-size poster framed in brilliant lights, depicting some gorgeous doll wearing not much at all, and hear the faint jazzy music coming from inside the joint. As I looked, my heart would skip a beat with the exciting but uncertain yearning for the day when some of the mysteries of the female sex would start unraveling for me. I guess you lose that feeling along with adolescence—and a little magic goes out of your life at the same time.

This neon spelled out *Club Extravaganza* and the life-size poster standing out front of the entrance was a portrait framed in brilliant lights of *Deadpan Dolores*—"the girl who says it all from the neck down." I got my moment of nostalgia looking at it, and a little extra besides. Shot from a three-quarter angle, Dolores was a tall, beautifully built blonde; her hands were cupped behind her head, and she wore the usual spangled bra-cups, known as "pasties" in the trade, and a rhinestone G string.

But it was the face that made me take a second look, and for Wheeler this was strictly a new approach. Dolores was a strawberry blonde with her hair pulled tight back across her head, leaving a short, urchin-cut fringe, and knotted at the back in a twelve-inch pony tail. Her face was molded in broad planes; her overly generous mouth curved in a faintly cynical smile, while her dark eyes sparkled with about the last thing you'd look for

ing rooms. The maître d' stopped outside the second door and knocked.

"Who is it?" a feminine voice asked from inside.

"Louis," he said. "There's a police lieutenant here wants to see you, Dolores."

"So send him in," the voice said coldly. "You don't expect a cop to pay the cover charge?"

I went inside the dressing room, closing the door on Louis behind me. Dolores was sitting at a dressing table, outlining the deep curve of her lower lip with a small lipstick brush. When she'd finished the expert job, she turned around to look at me. The robe which had made her look modest from a rear view was wide open—underneath she was dressed the same as in the poster out front. This time she was not only life-size but alive so the impact was that much greater. After a concentrated five-second study, I figured that poster just didn't do her justice.

"I'm Lieutenant Wheeler," I told her, "from the County Sheriff's office."

Her lips parted in a faint smile. "What did I do, Lieutenant?—one bump too many?"

"It's about your cousin—Patty."

There was a plaintive squeak from a box in the corner, which sounded like it needed oiling. Dolores sprang to her feet and rushed over to the box, then knelt down and lifted a small bundle of fur in her arms.

"Bobo!" she crooned reassuringly. "Poor little Bobo! Were you feeling all neglected down there? You know your big mommy loves you always!"

She came back to the dressing table and sat down again facing me, still holding the bundle protectively cradled in her arms. A small pointed head lifted above her forearm and the bright eyes of a pooch stared at me with insolent disdain.

Dolores smiled at me again. "Bobo hates being left out of anything—he gets awful jealous whenever I have company!" She hugged the pooch even tighter to her bare midriff. "Doesn't 'oo get jealous, 'oo naughty little Bobo, h'mm?"

The pooch gave a couple of sharp affirmative yelps, then was so exhausted it had to leave its pale pink tongue hanging out while it panted for breath.

"If the noise worries you, you can always have it stuffed," I suggested helpfully.

That revived the little monster long enough to let out a series of frantic yelps that had my nerve ends crawling for cover.

"You pay no attention to the wicked man, Bobo honey!" Dolores glared at me balefully. "He's just a horrible, cruel old policeman—and I bet *he's* jealous!"

"I was only trying to be helpful," I protested. "I figured you could get a couple of G-strings out of the pelt maybe, and it could make for a new gimmick."

She closed her eyes and shuddered violently and for a moment I figured the pooch's hair was about to stand on end.

"So forget it," I said apologetically. "You were going to tell me about Patty, remember?"

"Poor kid!" Her eyes were still cold as she looked at me. "She must have had some tough breaks to jump out of a hotel window like that!"

"You know any reason why she could've wanted to kill herself?"

Dolores shook her head. "I didn't know her real well, Lieutenant. She only came to Pine City about six months back, from back home in Indiana. Her folks got killed in an auto smashup and I guess I was about the only relative she had left. We didn't get along too well—she wanted to be a dramatic actress and she figured my job was degrading or something!"

"She didn't approve of you being a stripper?"

Her eyes grew even colder. "I don't care for that word, Lieutenant, I am an ecdysiast!"

"A—huh?"

"Ecdysiast! It comes from the Greek and translates as 'shedding skin'," she explained icily. "There's a world of difference between an exotic dancer and a mere clothes-peeler, Lieutenant!"

"I'm sure," I said humbly. "You figure Patty was

maybe still emotionally disturbed about her parents' death?"

"No," she said confidently. "I think she was glad to be rid of them—they figured a girl's place was right there, down on the farm where she was born." Her eyes were reflective for a moment. "Maybe they were right?"

"How about her friends?"

"That's easy—she didn't have any."

"Nobody?"

"This may come as a big surprise to you, Lieutenant," she snapped, "but even in southern California, the lonely are legend!"

"That's a good phrase—I must remember it," I told her. "You mean she didn't have one friend?—not even a boy friend?—there was no man in her life at all?"

"It's about a month since I last saw her," Dolores admitted, "but up to that time anyway, there was no boy friend. Things had gotten so bad, she'd joined up with a lonely hearts club even. She was all excited about it—couldn't wait for her first blind date. It was real pathetic!"

From the security of her warm and intimate embrace, the pooch gave me one last stare of cynical confidence, then closed its eyes and went to sleep. The heavy sound of its breathing still persisted but at least it was longer between pants.

"You remember the name of the lonely hearts club?"

"Sure—the Arkright Happiness Club. I asked Patty if it was run by a guy called Noah Arkright because he'd be a real expert at pairing off—but she didn't think it was funny at all."

"Neither do I," I said honestly. "But I'll bet Bobo bust a gut laughing."

"You are a horrible man!" She clutched the pooch even tighter until it squealed reproachfully without waking.

"There's always something vicious about a man who doesn't like dogs," Dolores said darkly. "It's a sure giveaway."

"You call that a dog?" I asked in genuine amazement. "Honey, the only difference between your pooch and any other ego-projection is that Bobo comes furnished. It's not the dog I dislike, only what you've done to it."

"Why don't you get the hell out of here, Lieutenant," she asked tightly, "if you're all through with the questions?"

"I guess I am—for now," I said. "But most likely I'll be back."

I had the door half open when she spoke again, the curiosity overriding her dislike of me for a moment.

"Does it matter this much, Lieutenant? I mean, why Patty killed herself? There's nothing anybody can do about it now, is there?"

"The questions are routine," I said vaguely, then turned and looked at her. "You ever stop to think—you and your 'the lonely are legend' and all—that if you'd given her maybe one-tenth the affection you give that pooch, she might still be alive right now?"

The muscles in her face set rigid as she stared back at me; then the pooch came awake with a sudden frantic help and leaped out of her arms to avoid being squeezed to death.

"It's just a thought," I said politely, then closed the door on her frozen features before she got around to throwing something.

On the way out I collected my hat and gave the girl two bits to prove I was a big spender even though the night was a hell of a lot younger than she was. I stopped and had another look at the life-size poster under the red neon. I gave it a whole five seconds, but there wasn't even a twinge of nostalgia. Then I drove the Austin Healey back home and was inside the apartment by ten.

I put Sinatra's "In the Wee Small Hours" on the hi-fi and made myself a drink. Sitting in an armchair, listening to the greatest vocal interpretation of "Mood Indigo" I ever heard, the living room walls seemed to shrink a little. I got a sudden urge to push them back

a couple of feet. My time was my own—I had a choice. I could sit and drink all night by myself or go to bed and sleep by myself—so what the hell was I feeling depressed about? Two drinks later I thought the hell with Deadpan Dolores—even if I was the latest recruit to join her legend—and went to bed.

Next morning, with bright sunlight streaming into the apartment, I felt no different at all. For a couple of seconds I considered going straight to the office but the thought of Sheriff Lavers' face when he read that Jefferson report decided me against it. A guy has to face facts and the fact was I felt lonely. A guy has to be logical and the logic was to do something about it. Don't sit around and mope, kiddo, get out there and make the real big try. Face it—if it's a lonely hearts joint you need, get out and find one.

I found the Arkright Happiness Club about an hour later on the thirteenth floor of a mid-city building—but maybe the floor was only coincidence. I knew a guy once who spent a week in Miami with his best friend's girl friend strictly through coincidence—they just happened to book the same room in the same hotel at the same time. What happened to my ex-best friend could happen to the Arkright Happiness Club, could happen to a dog even—a pooch yet—and I was back to Dolores Keller again.

Inside the office I felt kind of disappointed because it looked about the same as any other office—no pink plaster Cupid aiming a dart at a delicate portion of someone's anatomy, not even a vase full of hearts and flowers yet. Then I got my first look at the receptionist in back of a big desk and all of a sudden my heart sang—a little off key maybe, but definitely sang!

She was brunette with a careless hairdo and a Tahitian suntan to match the sultry beauty of her face. When she looked at me I saw her eyes were alert with a kind of primitive warmth. It was no trick to close my own eyes for a moment and see her poised on the bow of a lugger, her naked body silhouetted momentarily against the magnificence of a tropical dawn—

then she dived cleanly into six fathoms of crystal-clear water to gather a few more priceless pearls for me, before breakfast.

"Good morning," she said, and the overtones of her vibrant, faintly husky voice had my fingers plucking for breadfruit already.

"Uh!" I managed, and it was some effort, at that.

"Please sit down," she said and made the words sound like a sarong of love. "I'm Sherry Rand—and you are Mr.—?"

I plunked heavily into the nearest chair and it sighed like the trade wind through the palm trees. "Wheeler," I muttered incoherently. "Al Wheeler."

She smiled and her teeth were all priceless pearls, and what the hell we were doing in an office instead of an outrigger canoe, I'd never know.

"Please don't be shy!" she implored me. "We have hundreds of people who come in here for the very same reason you did. They're nice people but they're lonely and they want to meet other nice people but they don't know how to go about it—so they come to us. What did you say your name was?—Mr. Whooper?"

"Whooper?" That took care of the tropical paradise in one swift sheet of flame. I glared at her nastily. "Wheeler! Do I look like the kind of guy who'd be a whooper at this time of the morning?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Wheeler!" Her lower lip pouted slightly, and her stunning silk blouse did the same as she took a deep breath. "You were mumbling a little, Mr. Wheeler, but you seem to have gotten over your nervousness quite fast!"

"A morning wheeler can be a reasonable kind of guy just out bowling his hoop," I snarled. "But a morning whooper—"

"Well, now—" Her voice was still bright but the smile was getting a little limp around the edges. "Just how can we help you, Mr. Wheeler? I imagine you're looking for a nice girl with maybe a view to matrimony—and we're here to help you find the right one! Do you have any special preferences?"

a consoling voice. "I just want to make some inquiries about a former client of yours—Patty Keller."

"I guess you'd better talk with Mr. or Mrs. Arkright," she said doubtfully. "Excuse me."

I waited while she announced my presence and intentions in a hushed voice—the kind the morticians have copyrighted for when they're using the past tense—to whoever was listening on the other end of the phone. Then she hung up and said both Mr. and Mrs. Arkright would see me right away and it was through that door on my left.

So I opened the door to my left and walked into a small but neat office. This time there *was* a vase—it sat on the desk and it contained a spray of faded carnations. The flowers matched the rest of the furnishings—the drapes, the carpet, the wall paint—they were all faded. In back of the desk Mr. and Mrs. Arkright were standing like a faded photo in the family album—I had an eerie feeling that if you tapped either of them sharply on the shoulder all you'd get would be a cloud of dust.

Mr. Arkright was a little, chubby-faced guy with rimless glasses and the remains of his hair combed *thinly* back over his pink scalp—held in close contact by a glossy hair tonic. He wore a slightly crumpled gray suit which was maybe real sharp around the time Herbert Hoover was inaugurated. His tie was like *jazzy* with the alternating stripes of gold, black, and red, and it was knotted absurdly tight and small against the *high* starched collar that left him no neck at all.

"Good morning, Lieutenant," he said in a *rusty* voice that squeaked a little like he hadn't been *called* in a long time. "My name is Arkright—*Jacob Arkright*—and this is my wife Sarah."

Sarah was tall and lean with it. Her face, all angles and hollows, was surmounted by *thinning, frizzy* hair that had been dyed a brilliant *titan*. She wore a shapeless black dress that hung on her gaunt frame like a dust cover carelessly tossed over a *high-backed* chair. Her eyes were a faded blue and kind of fuzzy around

the edges. When she spoke, her voice had a sharp, brittle quality, like she was used to hearing evasive half-truths and she wasn't about to stand any nonsense from a police officer either.

"Sit down, Lieutenant." She pointed to a dusty chair. "Now—Sherry said you had some questions about one of our clients?"

I sat on faded cretonne, a little worn about the edges, and wondered how desperate you had to be for a little companionship to wind up in a dump like this. Sarah Arkright watched me for a moment, then resumed her own seat in back of the desk. Her husband still stood beside her, and his right hand dropped to her shoulder in a pose that put them even closer to that family album photo, circa 1927.

"Patty Keller," I said. "She was a client of yours, Mrs. Arkright."

"Patty Keller?" she repeated sharply. "I don't remember her, do you, Jacob?"

"I—think so." He cleared his throat apologetically. "A young girl who was very shy and wanted to be an actress—I do hope she hasn't gotten into any trouble, Lieutenant?"

"Didn't you read about it in the newspapers?" I asked him.

"We don't read newspapers!" Sarah snapped.

"Not in a long time." Jacob smiled at me, and with those over-white dentures, it was a mistake. "The standards of modern journalism, Lieutenant . . ."

"She's dead," I said coldly. "Yesterday afternoon she walked out onto a hotel ledge fifteen floors up and—"

"Suicide?" The rimless glasses magnified a kind of watery compassion in his eyes. "How tragic!"

Sarah Arkright folded her hands in front of her and pursed her lips thinly in disapproval.

"They don't have any roots," she observed calmly. "None of them do, that's their trouble today. No aim in life—all the standards have gone!"

"And Patty Keller along with them," I grunted. "Do you keep a file on your clients?"

"Of course." Jacob looked shocked at the thought of anyone doubting their businesslike efficiency. "Excuse me a moment, Lieutenant, and I'll get it for you."

He walked out of the office with a springy step which reminded me of the little white ball that used to bounce over song lines in one of the six shorts accompanying the feature at a Saturday matinee when I was a kid. After he'd gone I got out a cigarette and was looking for a match when Sarah spoke her sharpest yet.

"Not in this office, if you don't mind, Lieutenant! One thing neither of us will tolerate in this office is the foul smell of tobacco!"

Jacob returned as I replaced the unlit cigarette in the pack. He handed me a white manila folder, then resumed his position behind his wife's chair. The folder contained a couple of neat, typewritten detail sheets. Under the heading, "Patty Keller," was listed her address, age, occupation, interests, likes and dislikes—and it looked like somebody had done a real job on them. Page 2 was even more interesting. It was headed "Desirable Companion," and then broken down into detail under various subheadings, such as age, occupation, and financial status—all classified as unimportant. Character and interests were the things that concerned Patty: "Should be a kindly, sensitive man, interested in the arts and live theater especially."

The harsh voice of Sarah Arkright interrupted my reading.

"As you can see, Lieutenant," she said almost smugly, "we take a great deal of time and trouble analyzing our client's wishes before we attempt to find them compatible companions. Because of this, our percentage of successful introductions is very high—more than sixty per cent of our clients finish up marrying someone they've met through our Happiness Club!"

"How many wind up dead on a sidewalk like Patty Keller?" I wondered out loud.

The last notation in the folder was of a meeting arranged between Patty and one Harvey Stern, and the date was three months back. I ignored the outraged

snort from Sarah at my last crack, and looked at her husband.

"This meeting with Harvey Stern—" I prodded him. "How about that?"

"Is that the last notation on the detail sheet?" he asked, squeaking a little on the last word.

"That's right."

"Our system works this way," his wife cut in forcefully. "We study the detail sheets and if we think two clients are potentially compatible, then we arrange an introduction. We do nothing further until one—or both—of them reports back that the introduction wasn't satisfactory. In that case we then arrange a further introduction. If that's the last notation on the girl's sheet, she hadn't reported back to us at all."

"How about this Stern character?" I asked. "Did he report back?"

"I'll go get his file, Lieutenant," Jacob said quickly and bounced out of the room again.

Sarah glared at me in open hostility. "I don't see what this girl's demise has to do with us—or our club!" she grated. "I consider this an unwarranted invasion of privacy, Lieutenant!"

"That's your privilege," I said politely. "Maybe this Stern character was a sex maniac and the experience of her first date with him drove the girl to suicide?"

She was still making gabbling noises deep in her throat when Jacob materialized with a manila folder, a blue one this time.

"Blue for boys and white for girls?" I said.

He flashed those store teeth at me. "Blue and pink would have been even nicer," he said. "But we'd already started with white."

I shuddered slightly as I took the folder from his hand. "You use black for widows and gray for the divorced?"

Jacob made a faint incoherent squeak, then darted for the cover of his wife's chair. I took a quick look at the last entry on Harvey Stern's detail sheets and saw the last date he'd had through the club had been

the one with Patty Keller, and the dates matched. Harvey must have been one of the foundation members or maybe he was just unlucky—that date had been about the fifteenth on his list.

"I'd like to have these files for a couple of days—if you don't mind?" I said.

"Lieutenant!" Sarah looked shocked. "Those files contain confidential information. We guarantee all of our clients privacy! We couldn't possibly—"

"They'll be marked 'Top Secret' and kept in the county sheriff's safe at his office." I smiled brightly at her, then got to my feet. "Thank you for your help, Mrs. Arkright—and you, too, Mr. Arkright. Anytime I feel lonely I'll know where to come."

Sarah's face was a color to match her dyed hair while she struggled to find the right words; the rimless glasses magnified the bewilderment in Jacob's eyes into complete confusion. I left them looking like a couple of disturbed personalities in a psychiatrist's casebook, wondering on my way out of the office how they'd look with their heads shrunk down to the size of the knot in Jacob's tie. Cute as buttons, I figured.

Back in the outer office I stopped for a moment in front of the receptionist's desk and sniffed the fragrance of frangipani. I closed my eyes and could hear the sibilant rustle of grass skirts as they weaved a frenzied pattern around hula hips.

"Is something the matter, Lieutenant?" Sherry Rand asked anxiously. "You feel sick?"

I opened my eyes reluctantly, but the reality was almost as good as the fantasy. "Honey," I confessed, "I'm real lonesome but I don't have the price of joining the Arkright Happiness Club, and I don't feel I could be happy here—not after meeting the owners. You figure you could help out somehow?"

The primitive warmth was still lurking there in her eyes as she looked at me closely for a moment.

"I'm not sure," she said cautiously. "What did you have in mind, exactly?"

"A kind of blue and white folder combination," I said. "Dinner—my hi-fi machine—"

"Is situated inside your apartment, for sure," she said sweetly. "It comes with the intimate lighting, loaded drinks, and free-form couch—right?"

I looked at her suspiciously. "Who blabbed?"

"It's all part of a general pattern," she said shrugging gracefully. "If—just once—some guy would come up with an original idea for a date!"

"How about a burlesque show?" I asked, with sudden inspiration.

She blinked a couple of times. "You know something, Lieutenant? I never did get to see a burlesque show—outside of Muscle Beach, anyway."

"It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!" I urged. "See it now with an expert, on-the-spot commentator—a guy who can point up that vital fraction of a second when a grind changes direction and is about to become a bump."

"I never saw a burlesque show," she repeated slowly. "You can pick me up around eight."

"Give me the address," I panted, "like on which island do I beach my canoe?"

YOU COULD HAVE TOLD BY THE FLOWERS EVERY PLACE that it was a florist's shop even if you hadn't looked at the fancy script on the shopfront outside. A girl with thick hornrims and lank hair came forward to greet me. She wore a lilac-colored smock and flat-heeled shoes, along with a dedicated look on her face like she personally supervised the bees pollinating all summer.

"Good morning." Her voice was precise. "A corsage for a lady?—a dozen red roses?"

"Just some talk with the owner, thanks," I explained. "You think maybe he'd like a corsage?"

"Mr. Stern is very busy at the moment," she said frigidly. "And he never sees salesmen on a Wednesday, anyway!"

"An unfortunate traumatic experience with some roughneck pushing fertilizer?" I sympathized. "I'm Lieutenant Wheeler from the county sheriff's office, and I'm interested in hearts—not flowers."

She walked away from me, weaving her way around the gigantic vases that cluttered the floor until she was finally lost from sight in a back room. I lit a cigarette in self-defense against the heavy mingled scents that hung in the shop, then saw the florid-faced guy with a pink carnation in his lapel hurrying toward me as fast as his short legs would carry him. His face was a little plump and unwrinkled, like it had a lot of massage and was well scrubbed at least three times a day.

"I'm Harvey Stern," he announced breathlessly as he stopped in front of me. "My assistant said you are from the county sheriff's office?" His voice had a bland

quality to match the pink and white complexion. Cut off cleanly at the knees and standing in a pastel-colored vase, he'd blend happily with his surroundings, I figured, showing the hostess had good, if not exciting, taste in floral decoration.

"Lieutenant Wheeler," I told him. "I'd like to ask some questions about a girl called Patty Keller."

"I read about it." He shook his head sorrowfully, then removed an immaculate white pocket handkerchief and dabbed his forehead gently.

"A shocking tragedy, Lieutenant! A young girl like that with everything ahead of her—why would she want to destroy herself?"

I sighed patiently. "It's a good question and I'm trying to find an answer, Mr. Stern. Maybe you can help me."

"Me?" The look of surprise showed up a little too late to be completely spontaneous. "Why me, Lieutenant?"

"The Arkright Happiness Club," I said. "That's how you met her, isn't it?"

"Oh—that?" Stern looked faintly embarrassed. "I wonder if we could discuss this in private, if you don't mind? My office is just down there."

I followed him past glass-fronted jungles of orchids, carnations, roses, gladiolas; past pails of greenery and pots of ivy; through a small greenhouse area with benches jammed with flowerpots, and even a bunch of dwarf trees which I guessed figured prominently in the dreams of a pooch called Bobo. Finally we made it into Stern's office and he closed the door while my sinuses gratefully noted that there wasn't a single cut flower in the room. He moved around in back of a kidney-shaped desk and invited me to sit down in one of the molded fiberglass chairs, cunningly shaped to anchor only those people blessed with pointed buttocks.

"I guess membership in a lonely hearts club isn't something you want talked about out loud in public, Lieutenant." Stern gave an embarrassed giggle. "A con-

fession that you've flunked out in the school of human relationships!"

"The lonely are legend," I quoted happily. "Or that's the word from the burlesque set as I hear it. Anyway, I'm a cop, not an analyst, and it's Patty Keller who interests me."

"Of course," he said, nodding eagerly. "I can't tell you very much about her, Lieutenant, I'm afraid. You see, I only met her the one time. The club fixed up the date for us as usual—around three months back, as I remember—and that was the only time I met her."

"The date wasn't successful?"

"I'm afraid not." His head shook sadly, and I wished he'd stop using it for punctuation—another five minutes of it and I'd need a couple of tranquilizers.

"What kind of a girl was she?" I prodded.

"She wasn't very attractive—physically, I mean," he said carefully. "Not that I attach too much importance to looks, you understand. She just didn't know how to make the best of herself and her clothes were all wrong. But they weren't really important—only the external signs of conflict."

I gritted my teeth. "Then how about we get down to the essentials, Mr. Stern? I got my own fantasy of the perfect female and I'm willing to bet money she's no more unreal than yours, so why don't we stay with facts?"

"Yes, sir," he said and swallowed hard. "Of course, the essentials! Well, I'd say she was a maladjusted personality, Lieutenant—I guess that's about the size of it!"

"You mean like she was unhappy—goddam miserable, even?" I grated.

"That's it!" He smiled dubiously, then saw the look on my face and didn't push his facial muscles any more. "She had a miserable home life, she said, then her parents died and she thought she'd be free to do what she always wanted—become an actress. But she wasn't getting any breaks and her money was running

out fast." His head twitched again. "It was a depressing evening, Lieutenant, I can tell you!"

"Did she say anything about taking her own life—maybe hint a little?"

His eyebrows knit together in a troubled line. "Now you mention it, I seem to recall she said she couldn't go on much longer like this—unless something happened soon, she'd have to end it all." He shrugged. "By that time I wasn't listening too good—all I wanted was out—and I figured she meant she'd go back to Pumpkin Creek or wherever it was she came from in the first place."

"She just wasn't your type?"

"That's for sure," he said fervently. "I'm the nervous type myself—kind of shy—I'm looking for an outgoing girl, Lieutenant, someone to boost my ego. One more night with that Keller dame and it could have been me stepping off that ledge!"

I felt a sudden draft on the back of my neck and turned my head in time to see a bunch of muscles breeze into the office without bothering to knock. A real big guy with overlong blond curly hair and the kind of good looks that go to make the Hollywood version of a Roman gladiator. He wore a skintight sweatshirt and polished cotton pants, along with dirty white sneakers. I figured he'd be in his late twenties and was maybe a beach beatnik, or the garbage collection was running late this week.

"Hi, Romeo!" Muscles said in a booming voice. "How's every little thing with the guy that can't resist?" He ignored Stern's murderous glare and grinned at me, real buddy-buddy.

"Old Harvey here," he confided in a loud voice, "he's about the biggest Casanova you ever did meet! All the dames fall for him in a big way—big ones, blonde ones, little ones, brunette ones, even the red-heads and the fat ones. Maybe it's being around the flowers all the time that makes him smell so sweet, huh? Or maybe it's because he's a big spender with personality? Sometimes I figure I should scratch a hole in

my sweatshirt and stick a carnation in it—you figure it's the buttonhole that does the trick?"

"Shut up, Steve!" Stern said venomously. "You aren't even funny! Can't you see the *lieutenant* isn't amused?"

"Lieutenant?" the giant repeated slowly, and for a moment his face fell apart. "You mean—like a cop?"

"Lieutenant Wheeler—from the county sheriff's office!" Stern snapped. "This is Steve Loomas, Lieutenant, a client of mine with a misguided sense of humor."

"Yeah," Loomas said weakly. "That's me—always working for the laughs. I guess I walked in at the wrong time, huh?"

"We were about all through," I told him. "Tell me something—what does a guy like you want with flowers?"

"Huh?" He looked at me like I was just out of Mars, with three heads all saying something different at the same time.

"Mr. Stern said you were a client," I explained patiently. "So—unless he's running a bordello in the back room—you buy flowers from him, right?"

"Oh—sure—flowers!" Loomas nodded vigorously. "Yeah—all the time."

"So what do you want with them?" I persisted.

"Well—" he gave me a sickly grin. "You know how it is, Lieutenant, a guy likes to keep his pad looking nice."

"Like you never know who's about to drop in for tea?" I suggested sweetly.

His mouth dropped open as he stared at me blankly for a moment, then he made an effort and clamped his jaw tight.

"Sure, sure, Lieutenant, that's about the size of it." He edged toward the door. "Well, I sure am sorry for interrupting you guys. See you later, Harv—see you around, Lieutenant!"

"I wouldn't be surprised," I said honestly.

The door closed with a soft click and without Loomas' bulk, the office expanded back to its former size.

"He's a nice guy but—" Stern tapped his forehead

significantly "—an actor—an out-of-work actor, mostly—he doesn't have too much up here!"

"Maybe because he's got so much everywhere else?" I suggested brightly. "Just one more question, Mr. Stern. How do you get along with the Arkrights?"

"The Arkrights?" He looked genuinely bewildered for a moment. "Oh—the Happiness Club Arkrights—just fine, Lieutenant. Why do you ask?"

"They strike me as being a couple of odd-ball characters," I said. "I wondered what their effect is on a client. They just don't seem the type to be running a lonely hearts organization—I can't see them having the sympathetic approach."

"Maybe you're right," he said politely. "I met them the first time after I joined the club, but I don't think I've seen either of them since then. Most of the real work is done by their receptionist, I think."

The look in his eyes said he was remembering Sherry Rand, and I didn't blame him one bit, in fact I was right there with his memories, except he could stay the hell off my tropical island!

"Thanks for your time, Mr. Stern," I told him, and slid my nonpointed buttocks out of the uncomfortable chair.

"Not at all, Lieutenant." He escorted me to the door. "I wish I could help more—a young girl like that killing herself!" His head started wagging again. "A terrible tragedy—terrible!"

I had a steak sandwich in a diner after I left the florist, and got back to the office a little after two in the afternoon. Annabelle Jackson lifted her honey blonde head and looked at me like I was a hot news flash.

"How nice of you to stop by, Lieutenant!" She smiled sweetly. "The Sheriff's been waiting all morning—just hoping you might spare him a few minutes."

"It's one of my charity days," I explained modestly. "You know how it is—today I am dedicated to spreading sweetness and light. If I can bring a little sunshine into the Sheriff's sordid existence by sparing him a cou-

ple of minutes, who am I to deny him so much pleasure for such a little effort on my part?"

She tapped a pencil on the desktop thoughtfully while she considered. "I don't think he sees it quite that way," she said finally. "But why don't you go in and find out for yourself?"

"There's no hurry," I said hastily, and lit a cigarette to prove it. "I just got to thinking—how long is it since we had a date—even a small one?"

"Not long enough!" she said tartly. "I can still remember the unpleasant detail!"

"It was your own fault—if you hadn't screamed so loud, you wouldn't have bruised your larynx," I said reasonably. "I would have let you out of the apartment even if the janitor hadn't busted the door down. Did you figure me for a wolf, or something?"

"Girl-eating tiger, more like!" She brooded over her memories for a few seconds. "That was a real expensive dress and it's never looked the same since, in spite of the invisible mending!"

"An understandable mistake," I said with dignity. "The way I heard it, you said, 'Take it off,' not, 'Take it easy!' You should have spoken louder, honey chile."

"I was screaming at the top of my voice," she said coldly. "Those five loudspeakers of yours were all going at full volume, remember?"

"Why don't we start over?" I suggested. "How about tomorrow night?"

"Not tomorrow night or any night during the next thirty years, Al Wheeler!" she said decisively. "Once bitten by a girl-eating tiger—"

"Well—" I shrugged casually. "When you get real lonely, let me know, and I'll give you an introduction to an ace lonely hearts club that guarantees to find either the perfect mate or an adequate hotel window high enough above the sidewalk."

An ominous growl in back of me made me leap a couple of inches into the air. For a nasty moment I wondered if I was treed by a girl-eating-tiger. Then I looked around quick and saw it was

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ant-eating sheriff—maybe it wasn't any improvement.

"I hate to disturb you, Lieutenant," Lavers growled nastily. "I know it's in bad taste to mention work while you're around. But would you mind very much stepping inside my office just for a moment—" the veins stood out on his neck as he shrieked the last word at the top of his voice—"now!"

"Yessir!" I skipped past him fast in case he decided to stab me with the hot end of his cigar while I was real close.

He slammed the door shut and while the whole office was still rocking, waddled around to his chair and plunked down into it wearily. I sat in the nearest visitor's chair with a look of polite attention on my face because when you get right down to it, I prefer being assigned on an indefinite basis to the Sheriff's office as an alternative to being returned to the homicide bureau, where so many guys outrank me, it makes for ulcers.

"That Jefferson report," Lavers said coldly. "I'd like to congratulate you on a masterly thesis, Wheeler. Your exposition of the psychoneurosis of a con man is fascinating."

"Thank you, sir," I said with appropriate modesty. "It was nothing."

"You're damned right it was nothing!" he snarled. "The one thing you didn't bother explaining was why Jefferson's still walking around a free man after he conned that finance company out of twenty thousand dollars!"

"I thought you knew that already, sir," I said respectfully. "We know he did it, but we can't prove it—there's not one single piece of evidence that would stand up in court."

"And you're prepared to let it go at that?"

"What do you suggest, sir?" I still kept it polite. "I should follow him to Mexico and stay right behind him until he passes one of those unmarked, small-denomination bills?"

"The deputy mayor owns some stock in that finance company!" Lavers grumbled.

"Leave us hope he doesn't own stock in the insurance company that covered the finance company!" suggested cheerfully.

The Sheriff brooded for a few seconds, then shrugged his massive shoulders. "All right! How about this Keller girl?—or did you just stay in bed this morning?"

I gave him a run-down on what had happened up to now, and the only thing I left out was my coming date with Sherry Rand. Even a cop is entitled to some kind of private life. The Sheriff would accuse me of putting sex before duty, and as a matter of principle I hate even admitting he's right.

"The way you tell it, it all adds up to suicide," Lavers said when I'd finished. "That's the way the cousin tells it—plus this Stern character she had a date with. Maybe we should leave it at that?"

"I'd like to kick it around some more," I told him. "It's got a kind of wrong feeling about it, Sheriff. The Arkrights would be more at home running a funeral parlor instead of a lonely hearts club. Harvey Stern could have cheerfully murdered Loomas when he made his pitch about him being the Casanova of the cut-flowers set and all."

"I guess you've been around enough women by now to develop some feminine intuition!" he said sourly. "You know how accurate that is?"

"Don't forget the apomorphine, Sheriff," I reminded him. "How do you explain that?"

"Pure coincidence," he snorted. "I see no connection between a bad oyster and suicide, no matter how you cut it. If you were considering knocking someone off, Wheeler, I ask you—would you give her something to make her throw *up*?" His voice rose to a pitch of frustration.

"If I knew she was going to be perched on a fifteen-story ledge I might," I commented. "Besides, we're not in a month with an R in it."

"With that keen sense of humor, you can laugh yourself down to a sergeant in no time at all," he said coldly. Then he folded his paws over his paunch, leaned

thing like that. You don't care about a man's looks or his income bracket, only his soul. An intelligent, sensitive and refined gentleman is your ideal."

Annabelle looked at me hopelessly for a moment, then appealed to Lavers.

"Is he out of his mind, Sheriff?" she pleaded.

"That's always been my opinion," Lavers said smugly. "You can relate it to the phases of the moon mostly, I find."

"Then I don't have to do this crazy stunt he's babbling about?"

"It's entirely up to you, my dear," Lavers said easily. "I think it's a pretty irregular suggestion!"

"From Lieutenant Wheeler that's strictly routine!" she said coldly. "Thank you, Sheriff."

"Sure, you don't have to do it," I agreed. "Chances are this kid, Patty Keller, did really kill herself and wasn't murdered at all. It doesn't make any real difference whether we find out for sure or not—except I keep hoping that some other poor kid who's alone and desperate in a big city doesn't wind up the same way all because we didn't pursue—"

"Sheriff?" Annabelle bit her lower lip doubtfully. "Do you honestly think it would help if I did like he says?"

"You've got a lot of courage," he muttered, "asking a man holding political office to be honest! If I must—then the answer's yes, there's a slight chance it could help. But that's no reason for you to do it if you don't want."

"O.K.," Annabelle said dismally. "Then I'll do it!"

"That's what I like about the South," I said admiringly, "they've got courage and integrity!"

"I sure wish you-all had told me that the last time I was in your apartment, Lieutenant," Annabelle said bleakly. "I might have stayed!"

THE REPULSIVE GRIN OF ADMIRATION ON LOUIS' FACE when he greeted Sherry Rand died a sudden death when he saw me in back of her.

"Back again, Lieutenant?" he said hoarsely.

"Strictly for pleasure, friend," I said amiably. "Maybe you can find us a ringside table?"

"Sure, sure!" He nodded emphatically, "Anything you want, Lieutenant."

He gave us a table that was hard up against the raised dais, took our order for cocktails, then lumbered away. I took another look at Sherry Rand and thought happily of the long intimate hours ahead of us, depending on just how fast I could get her out of the Club Extravaganza and back to my apartment.

"This is fine," she said approvingly. "We should get a real good view from here."

"I've got one already," I said objectively.

She was the same sultry brunette with the careless hairdo I'd met in the Arkright Happiness Club, but maybe more so. The black sheath with its wedge-cutout top and flounced skirt showed a lot more of that Tahitian suntan than I'd seen before. The fragrance of her perfume was definitely primitive, made from equal parts of tropical sunset, crushed hibiscus leaves, and pagan love song.

An undersized waiter served the drinks while the five-piece combo played Gershwin like they didn't care who won. We ordered dinner and the food was lousy but who goes to a burlesque show to eat? Then the

house lights dimmed as the combo hit a rousing discord; the emcee bounced into the center of the dais like a zombie who was getting his voodoo at cut rates. The gags rated even cheaper, but mercifully he only had a five minute spot before the strippers took over.

Sherry Rand was completely absorbed as she watched a silver blonde work her way through a routine of bumps and grinds. She was still fascinated by the time a slightly overweight redhead and a too-lean, gray-streaked brunette had finished identical routines, and the emcee was back with a fast line of dialogue that made "Who was that lady I saw you with last night?" a joke for intellectuals.

I ordered fresh drinks and the waiter delivered them just in time—a second before the whole room was suddenly plunged into darkness. Five seconds later a single spotlight picked out Deadpan Dolores standing in the same spot where the emcee had been a few moments back, and it was one hell of an improvement.

She stood motionless in a graceful pose with her arms raised above her head. A long, flowing black robe covered her completely from neck to ankles. When the indignant muttering of the male patrons had risen to a mutinous roar, the house lights brightened slowly and the robe became completely transparent, revealing the gorgeous body underneath, clad in the same rhinestone minimum as the life-size poster out front.

I guess the routine basically wasn't much different from the others, but the sinuous movements became erotic when seen through the transparent black nylon. Some time later she stripped off the robe and the background music doubled in tempo and excitement as she performed a dance that was a mixture of hula and Egyptian belly dancing, and nobody would have believed so many things could go all ways at the one time.

The audience was still applauding frantically as she rested for a moment, her face still completely deadpan—not one facial muscle had twitched even since she first appeared. Then she walked leisurely toward our table. She stopped only when her thighs were almost

touching the table edge and her face relaxed into a sizzling smile. "Hello—students!" she murmured loud enough for most of the audience to scream wildly in appreciation. Right then I began to realize that prodding Louis for a ringside table had been one big mistake.

Dolores straddled her legs slightly and cupped her hands behind her neck, while the combo slid into the steady, rhythmic beat of "Bolero." She bent forward slowly from the waist until the top half of her torso was not more than a foot from the tabletop. Her dark eyes sparkled wickedly at me for a moment, then her pectoral muscles rippled into action under the smooth skin and the bra cups began oscillating gently—and in opposite directions! "Bolero" suddenly increased its tempo, and Dolores went right along with it.

I was suddenly panic-stricken as I realized that if the tempo got any faster, and Dolores along with it, I was about to be hit in the face by one of those wildly gyrating curves; so I turned my head away quickly and heaved a thankful sigh of relief at having been smart enough to avoid the danger.

The music stopped abruptly and in the sudden silence, Dolores' voice rang loud and clear. "Coward!" she said scornfully and it brought the house down while I sat quick-frozen with embarrassment. I never knew how the rest of the show went—I was still sitting there numbly with my face burning real bright like a beacon.

A fresh drink was delivered, breaking the spell. I grabbed the glass and swallowed the contents in one long gulp, then looked up to see the amused glint in Sherry's eyes.

"I thought it was cute," she said easily. "I wonder if I can do it."

"Not here!" I pleaded frantically. "Try it any time you like—but any place but here, please?"

"Of course," she said, nodding coolly. "I don't think this dress would stand up to it, anyway."

My nerves wouldn't stand for very much more and I knew it. I signaled the waiter frantically and lit a

cigarette, my fingers shaking as they held the match.

"I enjoyed it very much," Sherry said. "It was a wonderful idea, Lieutenant, and I'm very grateful."

"Yeah," I said hoarsely. "Real relaxing—and the name's Al."

"Hello!" Sherry smiled warmly at a spot a couple of feet over my head.

"We met already!" I said blankly.

"Hello," a voice said right over my head, and I leaped six inches out of my chair.

Dolores moved into my line of vision, wearing a silver sequined sheath that was supported by one finger-width shoulder strap. Her wide mouth was curved in a cynical grin as she sat down between us—the waiter having produced a chair from nowhere in two seconds flat.

"I hope I didn't embarrass you, Lieutenant?" she said, her voice dripping with mock sympathy. "But it was all Bobo's idea, really."

"That pooch is one of the real hot dogs," I said, coldly, "and my guess is he'll wind up hamburger like the rest of them!"

"I thought your act was terrific!" Sherry said quickly. "I was fascinated—I couldn't take my eyes off you."

"I guess having a petrified rabbit for my only competition made it easy," Dolores said and smiled warmly at her. "I never saw a man so downright nervous in my whole life before!"

They both laughed companionably while my teeth gritted together so hard they were almost worn down to the gums.

"How about a drink?" I snarled. "They serve a dog-catcher's daiquiri here—specialty of the house—over-proof pooch-hooch, with a twist of pelt!"

"Poor Bobo," Dolores said calmly. "I have a feeling you don't like him somehow, Lieutenant."

A burst of raucous laughter from a nearby table saved me from trying to think up a snappy answer. Sherry turned her head casually to see who was making the noise, then her face brightened with recognition.

"I know that man from somewhere, I'm sure!" she said determinedly. "Maybe he's a member of the club."

I looked across and saw a familiar carnation, flanked by the slightly overweight, redheaded stripper on one side, and the gray-streaked brunette on the other. The table in front of them was crowded with bottles and they looked like they were having a wow of a party. "He's having a ball," I commented.

"He always does," Dolores said in an amused voice. "He's the regular Don Juan of the joint—a real big spender, too. Harv, they call him—I don't know the rest of it."

"I guess I must be mistaken." Sherry giggled suddenly. "With the company he keeps, I couldn't have met him at our club!"

"He's here maybe four nights a week," Dolores said. "The two girls with him are building a nice collection of jewelry between them—but he thinks it's just his personality, of course."

Sherry stood up then, extricating her black clutch bag from our clutter of Scotch and ashtrays on the small table, and peered around the dim room. Reconnaissance successful, she said, "Don't go away, Dolores—I'm crazy to have a real talk with you," and made her way efficiently through the throng to the back of the room.

Left alone with Dolores, my embarrassment returned. I couldn't think of anything to say, and I concentrated harder than ever on Harvey's table. About then, two men walked up to it.

The first guy was medium height and a little heavy with it, wearing an immaculate dinner suit. His bald head gleamed as he leaned forward to speak with Stern, but I lost interest right there when I saw the second guy. It was strictly from Old Home Week—the other guy was Muscles, the beachcomber, now better dressed in sports clothes, but for sure the same Steve Loomas I'd met that morning in the florist's shop.

"The smaller one is Miles Rovak—the owner," Dolores said when I asked her. "That shows just how

much dear old Harv rates. Rovak wouldn't be bothered talking to more than a couple of customers during the whole week!"

"Who's the blond character with him?" I asked casually.

"Steve something—Loomas—he works for Miles," she said. "I had to bat him down hard one time, and since then we don't talk much any more."

"Excuse me a minute, Dolores," I said getting to my feet. "I'm sure Sherry will be back in a minute. Have a drink while you're waiting."

"My!" Dolores batted her eyelids up at me. "You sure are a free spender, Lieutenant! Is it all right if I have the good Scotch?"

I walked across to the most popular table in the whole room and smiled down at the florid-faced guy with the pink carnation in his lapel.

"Hello there, Harv," I said pleasantly. "Looks like you'll make that diploma yet in the school of human relationships!"

Stern looked up at me vaguely for a moment, then his face paled a little. "Good evening, Lieutenant," he said with no enthusiasm at all. "This is a surprise—seeing you here."

The redhead sitting on his left heaved a deep sigh that shook her whole magnificent balcony in a quivering movement.

"Hey!" she said in a too-loud voice. "I'm getting bored—how about some action, huh, Harv?"

"Speak gently to him, honey," I warned her. "He's the shy type. You want him to bust out crying or something?"

The gray-streaked brunette on his right looked at me curiously. "Get him!" she said coarsely. "Who is this creep, huh, Harv?"

I looked at her and shook my head sadly. "You just don't dig Harvey at all," I said regretfully. "Sure, he's looking for an outgoing girl O.K., and after watching your routine tonight, I'd say he'd enjoy himself."

ne—but you got to remember to boost his ego the whole time. Right, Harv?”

“A weirdo!” The brunette gaped at me for a couple of seconds. “A creep! Why don’t you have Steve throw the bum out of here, Mr. Rovak?”

“Shut up!” Loomas said coldly. “You run off at the mouth too much, Lena—you should watch it!”

“You know this man, Harvey?” Rovak asked in a clipped voice.

“This is Lieutenant Wheeler—from the sheriff’s office,” Stern answered in a strangled voice. “We met this morning.”

“It’s nice,” I said mildly, “meeting people again this way. How’s the pad, Mr. Loomas? Smelling real sweet now, I’ll bet?”

“Huh?” the beachnik said blankly.

“All those flowers you bought from Harvey’s shop this morning,” I reminded him. “Remember?”

“Oh—them!” He smiled bravely. “Yeah—the pad looks real great—sure smells sweet like you said.”

Lena—the gray-streaked brunette—giggled suddenly. “You—with flowers in your pad, Steve? Whatsa matter, you don’t like girls any more, or something?”

“I told you before to shut up,” he said in a low voice. “The next time you’ll wind up flat on your face—maybe it’ll make for an improvement!”

A sudden pinched look showed on the brunette’s face as she looked down studiously at the table, avoiding Loomas’ cold look of fury. She didn’t say another word.

“My name is Miles Rovak,” the bald-headed guy said, obviously working hard at getting some warmth into his voice. “Nice to have you here, Lieutenant—I’m the owner of the club.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I liked the floor show fine. I guess I had about the best view in the house!”

“We do our best,” he said absently. “You’re here on pleasure, not business?”

“Right,” I agreed. “I just wanted to say hello to Mr. Stern. Don’t let me break up the party.”

"Real nice meeting you," Rovak said, then snapped his fingers. "Louis!"

The ugly face of the head waiter appeared right beside him in two seconds flat. "Yeah, boss?" Louis asked anxiously.

"The Lieutenant's check," Rovak said easily. "I want you should tear it up."

"Yeah, boss." Louis had a pained expression on his face.

"That isn't necessary," I said.

"Real nice having you visit, Lieutenant," Rovak said. "I want you should be my guest any time."

"Well, thanks," I said sincerely. "Any time you're in the county jail I hope I can do the same for you!"

"Hey, listen!" Loomas objected loudly, then shut up suddenly as Rovak's elbow knifed into his solar plexus.

"It's a joke," the club owner said in a tired voice. "You know you don't have a brain, Steve—so why knock yourself out trying to use it, huh?"

I went back to my own table and found Sherry but no Dolores.

"What happened to Deadpan Dolores?" I asked.

"She had to get ready for her next number or something," Sherry said. "I like her. She gave me some good tips on how to—you know?"

The wedge-cutout top of her dress began to quiver alarmingly as I watched, bug-eyed.

"Sure, sure!" I said nervously. "I'll take your word for it, honey."

"I was only limbering up," she explained casually.

"I guess if Dolores is getting ready for her next number, that means we're about to witness another floor show," I said cautiously. "I don't think I could tolerate that comic a second time around. I couldn't tolerate that intimate, real close-up technique of Dolores', either. How about we fade the scene?"

"Why not?" Sherry agreed amiably. "You have any hot suggestions where next, Al?"

"I was just thinking of my apartment," I said vaguely. "You know—the hi-fi machine and all."

"That sounds just fine." She smiled warmly at me, while I gaped back in amazement. "I mean, I could practice there, couldn't I? You don't share the apartment with anybody else, do you, Al?"

"Not on a permanent basis," I assured her.

On the way out I stopped for a moment beside Stern's table and saw the party had shrunk a little. Rovak and Loomas had gone, so again there was just the florist with a stripper on either side of him. Right then I figured him for the star pupil of the lonely hearts club.

"We're just leaving," I said unnecessarily. "Thought I'd stop by and say good night, Harv."

"Real neighborly," he croaked. "Good night, Lieutenant!"

The gray-streaked brunette braced her body and gave me an out-of-focus stare through blurred eyes.

"You say he's a cop," she said loudly. "I say he's a creep!"

"Don't pay attention to Lena, Lieutenant," Stern said anxiously.

"I didn't pay any attention to her act," I said graciously. "Why should I start now?"

"Why, you—" The brunette started out of her seat, but Stern jerked her arm savagely and she bounced back again.

"Have fun, Harv," I told him. "That is, if you can unload Lena."

We got back to my apartment maybe a half hour later, and I left Sherry in the living room while I went through to the kitchen to get some ice. When I got back she was taking a close look at the hi-fi machine.

"You don't have a record of that 'Bolero,' Al?" she asked hopefully.

"Sorry," I apologized. "You want some rhythm, I can give you the Duke's 'Caravan'—and for that you don't need castanets!"

"Fine," she said with a bright smile. "Put it on, huh?"

I left the ice bucket on the table and sorted out the record, then put it on the hi-fi machine. Then back to

the table and the serious concentration of making drinks. By the time they were ready, the number was maybe halfway through.

"Ellington—the master," I said. "If there hadn't been gypsies before he composed this, there sure would've been right after the first time he played it!"

"I—can't—talk—now!" Sherry's voice panted breathlessly from somewhere in back of me.

I turned around slowly, figuring that not even an Ellington record could have made her breathless in so short a time, and right away—in no time at all—I was breathless, too.

The black sheath—with its cute cutout top, flounced skirt and all—was draped carelessly over the back of the couch, and a sheer black nylon slip lay right beside it. Which left Sherry wearing a minute, strapless, black satin bra and matching bikini-size panties.

She had her hands clasped behind her head and her eyes closed, her body gyrating gently in time to the music. What the bumps and grinds lost in professionalism they sure made up in enthusiasm—and that Tahitian suntan did stretch as far as the eye could see, which was a hell of a long way.

"Hey!" I said hoarsely. "Aren't you scared you might catch cold?"

Sherry opened one eye and squinted at me dreamily. "Not a chance," she said firmly. "Not so long as I keep on the move." A violent bump punctuated the sentence. "I think this routine is wonderful," she murmured through an ecstatic sigh. "How else could a girl get so much exercise without even moving from one place?"

It was a good question and I wasn't about to spoil it with an obvious answer.

"I made you a drink," I told her. "You must be getting thirsty by now."

Slowly the wild gyrations simmered down into a fluid, rippling movement as she undulated across to the couch, then dropped onto it—in perfect time with the last

chord of "Caravan." I walked the drinks across to the couch and sat down beside her.

"Thanks," she said, taking the glass and raising it to her lips. "I hope you're not one of the squalid guys who load a girl's drinks, Al?"

"Are you kidding?" I asked coldly. "With the going price for good Scotch being what it is these days?"

She drank a little, then relaxed, leaning back against the upholstery. "It tastes O.K.," she announced. "How did you like my routine?"

"It left me the same way it left you," I said honestly. "Breathless!"

"You're the first guy I ever met who had one original idea, anyway—taking me to the burlesque show," she said. "It's opened up a whole new life for me, Al. I may never be the same again!"

"The Arkright Happiness Club's loss will be the Club Extravaganza's gain!" I said solemnly. "I can see the time coming when I'll brag real hard that I once saw Sherry Rand's routine without having to pay the cover charge."

Sherry smiled dreamily. "That's nice! And talking of the Arkright Happiness Club—was that the reason you asked me for a date tonight?"

"Only the half of it," I admitted.

"O.K.," she said and sighed gently. "So start with the questions."

"They'll keep," I told her.

"Be smart, Al," she said coolly. "Business before pleasure—and it gives me time to cool off a little before I practice my routine again."

"The guy in the club tonight," I said. "The short one with the red face and the carnation, having himself a ball with the hired help. You were right—you had seen him at the Happiness Club. His name is Stern—Harvey Stern."

"I thought his face was familiar," she said comfortably. "But I don't remember anything else about him—if you're about to ask."

"I wasn't," I said. "Stern figures you do most of the real work around the place. Is that right?"

"Just the routine." She shrugged. "The Arkrights pay real well—so I have to earn my keep."

"Did they tell you why I was asking questions about Patty Keller?"

"She killed herself," Sherry said in a somber voice. "It sounded horrible."

"It was," I agreed. "I saw it happen. You remember Patty at all?"

"Vaguely."

"What happens when somebody walks into the Happiness Club, wanting to join up?"

"They see me first. I pass them on to one of the Arkrights, and after the interview's finished, whichever Arkright handled it gives me the details so I can make out the personal file on the new member. Then I cross check all the files and sort out the eligibles for one of the Arkrights to make the decision."

"Decision?" I queried.

"Who will be the new member's first date," Sherry explained patiently. "And that's about it—I handle the accounts, too."

"You remember whether it was Jacob or Sarah Arkright that made the decision on Patty Keller's first date?"

"No." She shook her head firmly. "Sorry, Al. Next question?"

"No more questions," I said. "You want to practice your routine some more while I make us another drink?"

"Sure," she said enthusiastically. "Play that record again for me, will you?"

I started the record going again, then moved over to the table and made fresh drinks. When I'd finished, I turned around and saw Sherry back in her original stance, her hands clasped behind her head, her body weaving gently. Only this time something new had been added—or more accurately, subtracted. The black satin bra and panties had joined the dress and slip on the back of the couch. And that Tahitian suntan did have

a hundred per cent coverage. I put the drinks back on the table because "I didn't want to spill good Scotch all over the carpet.

Sherry opened her eyes and looked at me lazily. The ceiling folded back and we were enclosed by a star-spangled, velvety tropical night. She came toward me slowly, her firm breasts jiggling a little as she walked, and her rounded hips moving in an exotic pagan rhythm of their own.

She stopped only when her lithe body was pressed hard up against me. A bright flame burned somewhere in back of her eyes, giving them a hot, melting warmth as they looked into mine. I slid my arms around her, my hands moving over the satin smoothness of her sun-tanned skin.

"I was right the first time, Al." She laughed huskily. "You are a whooper from way back!" Then her laugh changed suddenly into a shiver of ecstasy—and all the delights of my fantasied tropical paradise were suddenly real.

fice because the foul smell of tobacco was something else they didn't tolerate, along with lieutenants.

"Sure," I said to Arkright. "It's just that I'd like a little more co-operation from your wife. We're trying to nail down just why the Keller girl killed herself—and as she was one of your clients, I'd figure you'd be anxious to help."

"I don't see what searching through all our confidential files will accomplish," Sarah snapped. "A proper investigation is one thing, Lieutenant, while pandering to morbid curiosity is quite another!"

"The last date you organized for Patty Keller was with Harvey Stern," I said. "That makes us interested in Stern, naturally. His personal folder shows he's dated over a dozen girls since he's been a member of your club. We'd like to know a little more about these girls—how they made out with him. That's why I want to see their records."

Sarah primped her hideously red hair absently with one talon-like hand.

"I refuse!" Her brittle voice shook with anger. "I shall see our lawyers about this—this unwarrantable invasion of our privacy!"

"Now, now, Sarah!" Jacob repeated uncomfortably.

"Oh—shut up!" she snarled at him.

Behind the rimless glasses, his eyes swam with mortification. He took his hand away from her shoulder, let the fingers fiddle with the too-small knot of his tie for a few moments, then walked away from her stiffly, with all the bounce gone out of him.

"We have a duplicate of Harvey Stern's file," he said in a rusty voice. "I'll check the names of the girls from it, then get their files for you." He opened the door and stepped outside, closing the door behind him noiselessly.

"Well!" Sarah Arkright gobbled for a moment while that fuzzy look that was always around the edges, spread right across her eyes.

"It might be easier if I check those files in the

"Certainly not." He beamed at me anxiously. "You will return them as soon as possible?"

"For sure," I agreed.

"Good. Now, if you'll excuse me, Lieutenant, I feel I should be getting back to my wife."

"Of course," I said gravely. "I think she's missing your helping hand right now."

He gulped and a wan look spread across his face as he went back to the explosion waiting for him behind the door. After he'd gone Sherry moved in and leaned her delightful weight against me.

"I haven't seen you since breakfast," she murmured. "Did you miss me so bad you just had to come around the office?"

"I hate to disappoint you, honey," I said sadly. "But it's not you. It's that Sarah Arkright I'm crazy for—twenty-three skidoo! We're about to run away together and open a speakeasy in Chi. I got a friend who makes first grade booze in a bathtub out of sour apples and the dregs from Sterno cans. We got it made, Sarah and me!"

"What?—the bathtub booze?" Sherry asked coldly.

Then she backed off smartly, leaving me with my arms full of personal files. I looked down at them hopefully, wondering if there was any Kinsey-type research hidden under all those cute white covers.

"I've got everything?" I asked her.

"Nearly everything," Sherry observed drily. "To some girls, that is. Personally, I go for a slightly different type myself. . . . Oh, you were talking about the folders? Yes, you've got them all."

"Thanks a whole heap," I said.

There was a sudden burst of sound from the Arkrights' office—her thin voice rising to a crescendo, followed by the sound of a shattering vase.

"Sounds like Jacob's not making out too well in there," I observed. "Who's the boss of the outfit, anyway, him or her?—or are they equal partners?"

"They share about fifty per cent of the club between them," Sherry said casually. "The other fifty per cent

could provide competition!" She smiled wickedly, placed her hands behind her head and oscillated her hips, straining the tight skirt to the limit of tensile strength. "See if you can get a record of that 'Bolero' thing, Al," she said dreamily. "I've got a whole new routine worked out in my mind already!"

I took the files down to the office and found the Sheriff was out visiting with the mayor at City Hall, which was a break. Sergeant Polnik ambled into the office with a worried look on his face.

"Lieutenant?" His forehead corrugated alarmingly and I gave him my full attention because I always have a nervous feeling that if he ever has three separate thoughts in one day, there'll be a whirring noise inside his head and everything will fall apart.

"What can I do for you, Sergeant?" I asked sympathetically.

"Well, the Sheriff says I'm assigned to help you on this suicide case." He brooded for a moment. "I don't know what we're looking for, Lieutenant, and it worries me." He hesitated for a moment to make sure his meaning came across crystal clear. "I mean, like I'd feel better if you told me to do something, Lieutenant. I've been sitting around waiting since yesterday morning, and now I'm worried the way the Sheriff keeps on looking at me every time he goes by!"

"Pólnik," I said sorrowfully, "I've been neglecting you!"

I started in to rack my brains for something I could give him to do, when I had a sudden inspiration.

"See these?" I pointed to the heap of files on the desk.

"Sure, Lieutenant." His eyes lit up suddenly. "Hey! I get it—portology!"

"Poor *what*?"

"Dirty books," Polnik said with an air of smug superiority. "That's the proper name for them, Lieutenant—and that's why they all got those plain covers, huh?"

"Sergeant, this is your big chance!" I said desperate-

the homicide bureau, and asked him would he get somebody to run a check on Rovak, Loomas, and Stern, and see if they had any record. Johns said O.K., it was no trouble, and how was life in the Sheriff's office? I told him it was just fine if you happened to be a sheriff—and how was life in the bureau these days? It was my own fault for asking. By the time he'd finished detailing the major faults of the homicide bureau I could have been halfway to Ocean Beach already.

"I wouldn't worry," I said soothingly. "We should know for sure at any time now."

Lena's head broke the surface a moment later. She grabbed the side of the pool with both hands, rested for a moment, then hauled herself out onto the concrete. Her hair was plastered tight across her scalp and her mascara had run, making an eccentric pattern of smudges across her face so she looked like a Sioux on the warpath—and maybe she was.

"Swimming!" I shook my head reproachfully. "Lena—at your age!"

Her face contorted with volcanic fury and she opened her mouth to blast me where I stood, but the only thing that came out was water. Lena caught on real fast—to speak, to shout, to scream, her first necessity was air. So she took a deep breath, about the deepest I'd ever seen, and I guess it wasn't her fault at all. How could she have known that swimsuit wasn't designed for getting wet?

The crisscross lacing tightened suddenly until it looked like it would finish up embedded in her flesh, but its tensile strength just couldn't match up to her lung capacity. There was a sharp snapping sound as the lace broke in about three separate places, and it altered the whole shape of the swimsuit real fast. Instead of that V-opening right down the front to her waist, there was now a generously scooped U-opening right down to her waist. My second guess was proved right—Lena was a very well-developed girl—and if I'd had some "pasties" in my pocket I would have loaned them to her right then and there.

"Lena—don't!" Dolores screamed hysterically, and collapsed onto her chair again. "You'll kill me!" Her whole body shook uncontrollably with gigantic spasms of laughter.

Lena took one horrified look down at the front of herself, then did the only possible thing a lady could do under the circumstances—she leaped back into the pool again.

"I don't like to mention it," I said to Dolores, "but

head was bright pink from a little overexposure to the sun; a gaudy shirt over a pair of bermuda shorts two sizes too big for him, covered the thickness of his body. In that kind of getup he should have looked ridiculous but he didn't. Maybe it was the unconscious air of authority he had, or maybe it was the arrogant strength of will which showed in the harsh lines deep-etched into his face. Rovak just didn't have a sense of the absurd himself, I guessed, and therefore he would never look absurd.

"You wanted to see me, Lieutenant?" he asked brusquely.

"Some questions," I told him. "About a girl called Patty Keller."

"Patty Keller..." He repeated the name a couple of times, then shook his head. "I don't think I ever heard the name before."

"She's dead," I explained. "Went off a hotel window ledge a couple of days back. We're trying to find out why."

Rovak shook his head slowly. "I can't help you, Lieutenant. I'm sure I never knew the poor kid. What makes you think I can help, anyway?"

"A string of coincidences so long you wouldn't believe them," I said amiably. "The only relative the Keller girl had in town was a cousin who turned out to be a stripper, Dolores, who works in your club. Patty belonged to a lonely hearts club and her last date there was with a florist, Stern. While I'm talking to shy, introverted old Harv, who should breeze in but Loomas here?—calling Stern a Romeo and buying flowers for his pad!"

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Loomas wince visibly at the mention of flowers, then carefully avoid meeting Rovak's eye.

"Last night I was at your club," I continued, talking to Rovak. "And who do I meet but good old Harv having a ball with two of your sexiest strippers sitting in at his table! This guy needs a lonely hearts club? I asked myself. Somebody tells me he's a regular client

at your club, Mr. Rovak—got the reputation of being a big spender and a wolf at the same time. So I went over to his table to say hello and who should be there but Steve Loomas again!”

“I’m sorry,” Rovak said curtly. “But I don’t dig all this. What’s the significance, Wheeler?”

“Patty Keller’s cousin works at your club,” I said patiently. “Stern, her lonely hearts date, is a regular client at your club. Loomas, his pal who calls him Romeo, works for you. And then this morning I hit the biggest coincidence yet. I find out you don’t just own the Extravaganza—you also own fifty per cent of the Arkright Happiness Club!”

“Is there some new law against legitimate investments?” he snapped.

“Not the last time I looked,” I admitted. “I’m just curious to know when a coincidence stops being one—I figured you might be able to tell me.”

Rovak took a cigar from his shirt pocket, bit off the end and spat it over the side, then rammed it between his teeth in an irritated gesture.

“I don’t know from coincidence!” He found a match and lit the cigar, wreathing his face in fragrant smoke for a moment. “What little sense I can make out of your spiel, is that you’re investigating the cause of some poor kid’s suicide, right? So—for the second and last time—I never even heard of her until you told me her name. And a coincidence is just a goddamned coincidence!”

“Maybe if we come at it a different way, Mr. Rovak?” I suggested politely. “The way it’s worked out, you’re the hub of the whole thing—coincidentally. That makes things kind of convenient for me because you know everybody concerned. Like Harvey Stern, for example. Tell me about him.”

“All I know about Stern you’ve said already,” he grunted. “A fat little guy with a red face who must sell a hell of a lot of flowers if the dough he spends in my place is any indication!”

“Can you figure one good reason why a guy who’s a

big spender at your burlesque club would need to be a member of your lonely hearts club at the same time?"

Rovak grunted sourly, then shook his head. "No," he admitted, "I guess I can't at that."

"Now, maybe, you can begin to understand why I'm so fascinated by coincidence," I told him. "Especially where Harvey Stern is involved."

"You figure old Harv was the reason why this dame knocked herself off?" Steve Loomas asked incredulously.

"Don't knock yourself out thinking, Steve," I said kindly. "It must take most of your strength to keep those muscles working now."

"He's got a point," Rovak growled. "Is that what you think?"

"Maybe," I said.

"You seem to be going to a hell of a lot of trouble to establish why this kid killed herself." He looked at me curiously. "Is it that important, Wheeler? I mean, supposing you do prove she did it because of Stern—there's still nothing you can do about it, is there? Maybe it's a shame, but it's no crime to be the reason for somebody killing themselves, is it?"

"Not as long as Patty Keller *did* kill herself," I said softly.

Rovak puffed his cigar for a few moments, his hard eyes boring into mine. "There's some doubt about the matter?" he asked finally.

"There's a lot of doubt about the matter," I agreed with him. "And it keeps getting bigger all the time!"

Loomas had a grayish tinge under his deep suntan. "I read about it in the papers," he said hoarsely. "They said she jumped!"

"I was hanging out the window, trying to talk her into changing her mind," I said. "I was sure she had—she was on her way back inside when she swayed suddenly and fell. She never jumped."

"Well," Loomas said, shrugging his massive shoulders, "even so, Lieutenant, that's not murder—is it?"

"The autopsy showed there was apomorphine in her blood stream," I said, and told him what that could do.

rolled over slowly onto her back and glared up at me.

"You have eyes like red-hot rivets!" she snapped.

"Is it my fault you happen to be an exotic, ravishingly beautiful woman?" I asked heatedly. "Am I responsible for the long-stemmed loveliness of your legs?—the geometric perfection of the rest of your anatomy?—the hundred-per-cent-plus desirability quotient you have? Blame your mother and father if you must blame somebody, but not me—I'm strictly an innocent bystander!"

"Well!" Her eyes widened with surprise and maybe something else, I couldn't be sure. "I never knew a cop could be that poetic before!"

She sat up on the chair to take a closer look at me.

"It's not the kind of vocal appreciation I'm conditioned to, you understand?" she said in a wondering voice. "Up until now, most of my compliments have been at the top of the lungs—y'know?—in simple, homespun locker-room language."

"This could be the start of a whole new era," I said modestly.

"I have the uneasy feeling this could be the start of something," she said thoughtfully. "Kidding aside, Lieutenant, what does appeal to you most about me—if anything?"

"You really want to know?" I said soberly.

There was a shade of embarrassment in her eyes. "Even if you have to be a little earthy!"

"Your face," I told her.

"You're kidding!"

"The hell I'm kidding!" I said abruptly. "The first time I ever saw you was on that life-size billboard outside the club. Sure, you got a wonderful figure, but you wouldn't be a stripper if you didn't. But that face of yours stopped me dead in my tracks. It's not beautiful, you understand, but it's got personality and intelligence—and they're both kind of rare in burlesque."

Her eyes filled almost to overflowing for a moment, then she blinked fiercely and turned her head away.

"My God!" she said in a muffled voice. "You'll have

"Acting?" He blinked at me a couple of times. "How the hell would I know?"

"Isn't that your racket?"

"Somebody's been kidding you, Lieutenant!" He laughed. "Me—an actor! I work for Mr. Rovak, look after his boat—things like that."

"I must have a word with good old Harv," I said gently. "I'm a cop with no sense of humor when I'm working."

"It was him that told you I was an actor?" Loomas shook his head bewilderedly. "He must be losing his mind!"

"A mostly out-of-work actor' were the actual words he used, as I remember," I said. "Maybe there's a simple answer—like he's a congenital liar?"

"Maybe it isn't as simple as that," Rovak said sharply. "I've been thinking—since you told me why you're so interested in that Keller girl's death—that I don't go for that long string of coincidence any more than you do, Lieutenant! The more I hear you talk, the more it sounds like Stern is the guy in back of all these coincidences!"

"You could be right," I nodded. "If I keep on plugging hard enough, I figure sooner or later I'm going to find out for sure."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" he volunteered.

"I don't think so," I said, "but thanks for suggesting it—and thanks for being patient with all my questions."

I stepped back onto the jetty, then headed toward the pool. When I got there, I saw Lena had disappeared, but Dolores was sprawled face down on her lounging chair. A wad of hair peered up at me from under the chair then vanished quickly, and a moment later I heard a whimpering noise that was definitely neurotic.

"You should buy that pooch of yours some analysis," I said to Dolores' shapely back. "He's developing a fixation about me!"

"Doesn't everybody?" she asked coldly.

I lit a cigarette, taking my time about it, while I admired the view on the lounging chair. Then Dolores

rolled over slowly onto her back and glared up at me.

"You have eyes like redhot rivets!" she snapped.

"Is it my fault you happen to be an exotic, ravishingly beautiful woman?" I asked heatedly. "Am I responsible for the long-stemmed loveliness of your legs?—the geometric perfection of the rest of your anatomy?—the hundred-per-cent-plus desirability quotient you have? Blame your mother and father if you must blame somebody, but not me—I'm strictly an innocent bystander!"

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Her eyes filled almost to overflowing for a moment then she blinked fiercely and turned her head away.

"My God!" she said in a muffled voice. "You have

me going like some starry-eyed college kid in a minute!"

"Or like your cousin—Patty?" I suggested.

She looked back at me, the hurt showing on her face. "Did you have to spoil it that way?" she whispered.

"The feeling is—and it's getting stronger by the minute—that she didn't kill herself after all," I said briskly. "Now it looks like she was murdered. I thought you might like to know."

I started walking again, past the chair, toward the Healey on the driveway.

"Lieutenant!" Her voice was suddenly frantic. "Wait a minute . . . Lieutenant? . . . Hey, come back here!"

I kept going until I reached my car, then reversed it down the driveway out onto the road and pointed its bullet nose up toward Pine City again.

The top was down on the Healey and the sea breeze felt good against my face. I wondered if I was getting any place at all—or if Patty Keller had been murdered, even. All I had was that string of coincidences I'd detailed for Rovak—and maybe they meant nothing. Right then I couldn't see any alternative to the unoriginal squeeze play I'd been using all the time. If you don't watch it, it can get to be a little corny in spots. You keep seeing the same people over and over again, asking the same questions. You try to look wise and make vaguely ominous remarks—and all the time you're hoping that somehow, someplace, you'll get some kind of result from somebody. For all you know, the guilty party is two jumps ahead of you the whole time and silently laughing his head off as he watches your fool antics.

It was a cheering thought to keep me company on the way back to the city. Later, I wondered why I'd gotten this strong feeling about the kid's death. Maybe because I was right there when it happened. That sounded like a reasonable answer and I'd have been happy to stay with it, only I knew it wasn't true. The real reason why it had gotten so deep under my sk

was because a girl called Patty Keller had died suddenly and unpleasantly—and nobody in the whole wide world gave a goddamn about it. In back of my mind was the uneasy conviction that if it had happened to a guy named Wheeler instead of a girl named Keller, the reaction would have been about the same. So somebody had to worry about the girl and I was elected. Because if I didn't worry for her, who would worry for me?

It was about then I figured if Dolores sent Bobo to a headshrinker for analysis, maybe I should go along, too. We could share our fixations along with a couple of rubber bones on the headshrinker's doormat.

"APOMORPHINE?" STERN REPEATED. "I NEVER HEARD OF it before, Lieutenant! Is it something you can buy in a drugstore?"

"Not without a prescription," I said. "But I guess that wouldn't stop anybody if they wanted some bad enough."

The white carnation in his lapel seemed to wilt a little. I didn't blame it at all—the heavy, cloying atmosphere inside the florist's shop, choked with the scent of a hundred different flowers was enough to make even an orchid wilt.

Harvey Stern's pink and white complexion changed color rapidly, like a chameleon, alternating between the two colors but favoring white most of the time.

"Murder!" he said breathlessly. "It sounds so—so fantastic, Lieutenant! A harmless, pathetic girl like Patty! Who would want to kill her?"

"You—maybe?" I growled.

"Me?" His plump body quivered agitatedly. "You're joking, Lieutenant!"

"You both belonged to the same lonely hearts club," I said evenly. "You were the only date she ever had through that club. The last time I was in here you told me about it. You felt embarrassed belonging to such a club, you said, it was a confession that you'd flunked out in the school of human relationships. You were the nervous type, you told me, you needed somebody to boost your ego."

"I only told you the truth—as I see it at least," he said defensively.

"Then Loomas busted into your office and told me you were a real Romeo," I went on. "No dame could resist you. Last night I saw you in the Extravaganza, whooping it up a little with a couple of strippers for company. You didn't look the nervous type then, Harv, you looked like you were enjoying it just fine—until you saw me, anyway. They tell me you're one of their best clients—a wolf, but a free-spending wolf!"

"Well—I—I—" He stuttered helplessly to a standstill.

"Your old buddy, Steve Loomas, just dropped around to buy some flowers," I snarled. "'He's an actor—a mostly out-of-work actor'! He works for Rovak who owns the burlesque club and you knew damned well he did!"

"I—I was upset—nervous," Stern babbled incoherently. "I didn't know what I was saying."

"I got your personal file from Jacob Arkright," I pounded him again. "Patty Keller was the last one of more than a dozen dates arranged for you through the Happiness Club. We took the files of every girl who ever had a date with you, Harv, and they're being checked right now. All we need to do is find another suicide—a sudden death, even—and you're in more trouble than you and a brace of good lawyers can handle!"

He covered his face with his hands, his body still shaking violently.

"Lieutenant," he pleaded in a quavering voice, "if that girl was murdered, I swear I didn't do it! I had no reason—no motive—this whole conception is a nightmare!"

"If you're a congenital liar, Harv, this kind of shock treatment could have therapeutic value," I said coldly. "But I don't think you are. My bet is you lied for good reason. Either you murdered the girl or you're trying to cover for somebody else. I'd think it over real hard because time's running out on you fast. Any minute now it's going to be too late to tell the truth because nobody will believe it—whatever it is!"

I turned away from him and walked out of the shop—not too fast in case he changed his mind right then and wanted to call me back. But he didn't. He just stood there with his hands still covering his face and his body twitching like he had palsy. If it was a severe traumatic reaction maybe it did him some good—but for sure it didn't do me any good at all.

It was around six when I got back to the Sheriff's office, and the breeze had gotten a lot more violent in the last hour, like it would be blowing up a storm before the night was through. I opened the office door to step inside and nearly cannoned into a dame on her way out.

"Sorry," I said, real polite, and stood to one side to let her go through.

She reminded me vaguely of Patty Keller, I thought absently as I glanced at her. The same straggly blonde hair, the face devoid of make-up; her clothes didn't fit so she looked shapeless, whether she really was or not. She gave me a filthy look as she drew level, and I figured that was typical of all the dames who could spend ten years on a desert island with a whole detachment of Marines and never get a second look even.

"Good night, Lieutenant!" she hissed at me suddenly. "Or don't you speak to your friends any more?"

"Huh?" I croaked feebly. "We've met someplace before?"

"Al Wheeler!" Her fist suddenly beat a frantic tattoo against my chest and I figured she must have flipped her lid for sure. "You—you fiend!" The heel of her shoe ground against my shin with excruciating accuracy. "This is all your fault!"

"Lady," I whimpered, "either I got an identical twin I haven't even met yet—or you have a great big hole in your head! I don't know you from a crowd!"

"That's what makes me so mad!" she hissed, then clobbered me across the side of my face with her purse. "It was all your idea in the first place—I'd be a big help, you said! Join that lonely hearts club and—"

"Lonely hearts club" I peered closely into her face. "It is you?" I said feebly. "Annabelle?"

"On my way to my first date, courtesy the Arkright Happiness Club," she snarled. "And you don't even recognize me—that does up my ego real fine. Now I feel confident!"

"Annabelle, honey!" I said hastily. "You're a genius—it's a masterpiece no less! Nobody would recognize the real you—the glamorous, magnificently beautiful southern rose, with those proud generous curves jutting—"

I collected the purse on the other side of my face.

"Where they jut is none of your business, Al Wheeler!" Annabelle said fiercely. "And if I ever find out this is just your idea of a funny gag, I'll—" The purse crunched against the bridge of my nose with eye-watering emphasis. Then she marched off with a determined stride, leaving me to wonder whether Sherman would have ever made it to Savannah if he'd had Annabelle around to contend with.

Sheriff Lavers was sitting in his office, a pile of white file folders stacked on the desk in front of him. He was busy reading one of them and didn't notice me come in. I watched respectfully for a few seconds, then cleared my throat gently.

"Occupation: county sheriff," I murmured. "Desirable companion: young and blonde, sexy and immoral—with just the one hobby."

Lavers lifted his head and looked at me thoughtfully for a while, then shook his head slowly in open admiration. "How did you guess?"

"We all have the same dreams, Sheriff," I said modestly. "Sometimes it frightens me—millions of guys sharing the same dream every night, with the same girl. I bet she's scared to go to sleep nights!"

"If you're one of those millions, I understand her problem," he grunted. "Polnik told me about these—" he gestured toward the stack of folders. "He's still out checking on the women involved. There was a kind of

glazed look in his eyes when he left, so I'm not too sure when we can expect him back—if ever!”

“That Polnik—” I sighed gently. “He gets all the breaks around here.”

“Oh, sure!” Lavers grunted. “He gets the girls from the lonely hearts club, while you're stuck with the strip-pers from the burlesque club! I can arrange a swap if you like, Lieutenant.”

“Thank you, sir, but no,” I said quickly. “I think a good law enforcement officer should stick with the assignment given him, rough as it may be!”

The Sheriff's eyes rolled toward the ceiling in mute appeal, but for once the luck of the Wheelers held good, and no bolt of lightning descended upon my head.

He tapped the stack of personal files with one finger. “Did you take a good look at these, Wheeler?”

“Not yet, Sheriff.”

“A couple of interesting points,” he rumbled. “They can keep for the moment. What progress have you made today if any? I know I'm an incurable optimist but I'm presuming you did do a little work for this office sometime—a half hour maybe—sandwiched in between a redhead and a blonde?”

“Gosh, Sheriff!” I said admiringly. “I wish I could afford the writers you got—I'd have every case wrapped up before lunchtime yet.”

The telltale purple started to flood across his cheeks.

“Progress, sir?” I started in real fast on a summary of the day's events before the smoke started to whistle out of his ears. He'd calmed down again by the time I'd finished and it made me feel a little easier in my mind. One of these days Lavers is going to explode into little pieces and stay that way—and I don't want to be the guy who lit the fuse, then let it burn too long.

“That reminds me,” the Sheriff said when I was all through, “Johns called you back this afternoon. No record on Rovak or Stern, but Loomas did two years in San Quentin for a mugging rap—got out around eighteen months back.”

"It's interesting but it doesn't prove anything," I said glumly.

"Let's get back to the personal files for a moment," Lavers said. "These represent every date Stern's had through the Arkright Happiness Club?"

"That's right," I said. "But we won't know much about the women concerned until Polnik gets back and tells us something about them—or the ones he's gotten to contact so far, anyway."

The Sheriff had that nasty, smug look on his face he always gets when he's about to pull a fast one.

"We got—" he ran his finger down the spines of the folders as he counted "—fourteen files equaling fourteen females, and the one thing they got in common is they all dated Stern through the lonely hearts bureau—right?"

"Right," I said cautiously.

He shook his head triumphantly. "Only half right, Wheeler. There's another factor, common to nine of them. Those nine have also dated a guy named George Crocker."

"But not Patty Keller," I said. "She only had the one date and that was with Harvey Stern."

Lavers fumbled in his top pocket for a cigar, then changed his mind and took out his pipe and tobacco pouch from the top drawer of his desk instead. I didn't like that—the pipe meant he was getting to feel mellow and that nearly always means he's outsmarted me already.

"Maybe," he suggested as his pipe bowl burrowed into the pouch.

"What do you mean, maybe?" I said coldly. "It's an established fact."

"Only if you're sure you can trust the records," he said, with a damn sight too much logic for my liking. "Only if these files are always kept completely up to date by the Arkrights. Maybe Patty Keller did have a date with this Crocker—after the one she had with Stern—but for some good reason it wasn't noted on her file."

"Could be," I said glumly. "Why don't we take a look at Crocker's file and check if there's a lead in it someplace?"

"I sent a patrol car around there especially to pick it up," Lavers growled. "I called Arkright and told him my men would be there to collect Crocker's file, and he put on a big act how his wife was going to sue for a piddling little ten million dollars or something—invasion of privacy, some crap like that. I told him it was up to him—either he turned it over voluntarily, or we'd get a court order."

The Sheriff grinned fiendishly. "I also told him if he made me go to the trouble of getting a judge's signature for one little file, I'd make sure a posse of reporters came with me when I arrived to search his premises!"

"You're a real cagey sheriff, Sheriff," I said coldly. "So where is the file on George Crocker now?"

"That's a good question," he growled. "It's disappeared from the filing cabinet."

"Who said?"

"Arkright, for a start. He had hysterics all over the office, so the boys told me. They didn't believe him, naturally, and he told them to go ahead and search the whole office. They made a real job of it but they didn't find any folder with the name of George Crocker on it."

"You figure Arkright's either hidden or destroyed it?"

Lavers shrugged his wide shoulders. "Arkright—his wife—the receptionist—an unknown quantity called X—your guess is as good as mine, Wheeler."

A cloud of dense smoke from his pipe drifted my way and one sniff confirmed my worst suspicions. "Why don't you try tobacco in that thing sometime?" I said and nearly choked. "Make a break from that stuff the city sanitation department keeps unloading on you."

The phone rang and Lavers had a look of vague disappointment on his face as he picked it up—maybe he'd had a redhot answer all ready for me.

"County Sheriff," he said, then grunted sourly, "Yeah, he's here."

He passed the phone across to me. I pulled it out of the chair to get in the wall "hook" and the mouthpiece.

"Lieutenant, this is Harvey Stem," I announced in my ear. "I've—I've been thinking about what you said earlier. I think maybe you're right."

"About what?"

"About me telling the world that I was a liar. Do you think you could come in and see me away? It's difficult to talk over the phone—so many things involved and—"

"Sure," I told him. "I'll be right in. I'll wait there for me."

"I'll most certainly do that," he said, almost grateful as he hung up.

I handed the phone back to the man who looked at me inquiringly.

"That was Harvey Stem," I said. "He wants to talk—wants me to go on with him."

"All right," he granted. "Don't worry about George Crocker—and you're through talking to him. Even a county sheriff has to wait."

"Looking at you, Sheriff, nobody would wait," I said admiringly, then got on with my work.

Around thirty minutes later I went outside the shop and climbed on the roof, announcing brightly to the world that I was a Florist, dwelt within the purple building. The door was closed and nobody answered. I had changed his mind about coming in. I was sure he had picked a lousy time to come. I rang the bell a half-dozen times. I tried the door and it wasn't locked. Sometimes I was wrong. I was a simple-minded character.

Inside the shop, the counter was covered with a hundred different flowers. I looked at them with triumphant tenacity as I closed the door and turned for the light switch. A couple of minutes later I

flooded the interior with light, I saw that the shop was empty except for the flowers. I called out Stern's name a couple of times and didn't get any answer, so I walked through toward the office in back with the faint hope he was waiting there for me and he'd suddenly gotten stone deaf at the same time.

I opened the office door, stepped inside, and switched on the light. Stern was there O.K., sitting in back of his desk, but he wasn't waiting for me. He wasn't waiting for anything any more, except Judgment Day maybe. His body was slumped forward across the desk and a trail of blood had seeped from the hole in the side of his head, down one side of his face, to form a dark pool on the desktop.

There was a gun still clutched in his right hand and close to it an envelope with my name written across the front. I picked it up and opened it, extracting the note from inside. Stern's signature was at the bottom; his typing was very neat and his prose was to the point, almost terse:

You were right, Lieutenant—it was my fault Patty killed herself. I took her out a few times and I guess I kidded her along a little so she figured we were going to be married. Then she started getting on my nerves so I told her it was all over and we were through. She got hysterical and told me she was pregnant and if I didn't marry her, she'd kill herself. I thought she was pulling the old routine on me, so I told her fine, go ahead and kill yourself, it'll save us both a whole lot of trouble. I never dreamed she was serious about it. I guess I've been half out of my mind ever since. I don't think I can face the truth coming out. This way out is the best for me. This way I don't have to see the look on my friends' faces after they know the truth.

I dropped the note back onto the desk-top beside a tall, slender vase of calla lilies. They seemed kind of appropriate and I wondered if Harv had thought of that before he pulled the trigger—and I had my courts on both scores.

"THE MINISTER, THE DOCTOR, AND THE FLORIST," DOC Murphy said happily. "We're all mostly concerned with births, marriages, and deaths. The happy and unhappy triumvirate!"

"A man blows his brains out, and the doctor gives us philosophy yet!" Sheriff Lavers said disgustedly. "You have a perverted sense of timing, Doctor!"

"You should remember, Sheriff," Murphy said gleefully, "that it's mostly death that gives both of us a living!"

"You don't really believe Stern blew his brains out, Sheriff?" I asked incredulously.

Lavers looked at me coldly for a couple of seconds, then sighed heavily. "Here we go again!" he snarled. "The man who can't tolerate any simple and logical explanation for anything! They must have a word for people like him in psychiatry, Doctor!"

"Sure," Murphy said promptly. "I could have given it to you a long time back—'nuts'!"

"When the two of you are through with the song-and-dance routine," I said patiently, "maybe we can talk a little logic?"

"The man shot himself," Lavers snorted. "That's self-evident! He left a signed note giving his reasons—that's also self-evident. What more do you want?—a repeat confession from beyond the grave on a ouija board?"

Two white-faced guys in white coats loaded the corpse onto a stretcher and wheeled it out of the office on

its first stage of the trip to the morgue. I lit a cigarette to take the suffocating onslaught of flower scent out of my nostrils and tried to keep from blowing my nose.

"I think it's all a little too neat," I said. "The whole thing all adds up a little too easy—like somebody laid it out real careful."

"This may come as a surprise to you," Lavers said heavily, "but sometimes things work out that way—real neat!"

"Doc," I appealed to Murphy, "Tony Nelson was pregnant, was she?"

"No, sir," Murphy said confidently. "She wasn't."

"It doesn't prove anything," Lavers said quickly. "She probably told Stern that, trying to force him to marry her, and when he wouldn't—when she threatened to kill herself and he said it was a great idea—that was the last straw. She was a lonely girl with nobody to turn to for help, and Stern treating her the way he did was enough to knock her right off balance. Do you think, Doctor?"

Murphy's satanic face sobered down. He thought about it for a moment. "I've never decided finally. It was a pretty good idea, but not a perfect one, at that!"

"Anything else, Wheeler?"

antly.

to the office. When I got in here, this room was also in darkness."

"So?" Lavers grated.

"So Stern called me and said he was ready to talk and for me to come right out," I said. "Then what happened? He sat at his desk and thought about it—decided he couldn't face the truth getting out and he'd rather die first. So he types a note, explaining all the reasons, seals it an envelope and addresses it to me. Takes a gun out of the drawer or wherever it was, then switches out the light—goes back and sits down behind his desk and shoots himself? If you were in his place, would you bother about the light?"

"Maybe," Lavers said. "Who knows what a guy will bother about when he's in a frame of mind to kill himself?"

"Oh, brother!" I said feelingly. "Then how about the mysterious George Crocker you discovered in those files? How about the odd coincidence that when you look for his file in the lonely hearts office, it's suddenly disappeared?"

"Could be coincidence," he said stoutly. "Could be there's some scandal attached to Crocker that the Ark-right's don't want made public."

"Could be the county sheriff's got rocks in his head," I said disgustedly. "How about *that*?"

"Like I told you before, Wheeler," he grunted, "you just can't take a simple explanation for anything. I sincerely think you should consult the doctor here about seeing a good psychiatrist and having some analysis. It's getting to be a fetish with you—you have to complicate the most uncomplicated issues!"

"If I need a headshrinker, so do you," I said icily. "But at least I don't need a body-shrinker, too!" I stormed out of the office, hearing Murphy's raucous cackle rising to a crescendo in back of me.

It took a couple of hours, a couple of drinks in a midtown bar, and a rare steak in a restaurant way over my income bracket, before I'd cooled off enough to think about the Sheriff without lighting a magnesium

flare inside my head. By that time the evening was all shot anyway, and there was nothing left to do but go home to bed.

It was after eleven-thirty when I walked into my apartment and found I had company. At first glance I figured somebody had stolen a Far East sunset and dumped it on my couch. At second glance the sunset resolved itself into a strawberry blonde, wearing a silk blouse printed with all the warm-glow colors of the spectrum and a pair of tight, ankle-length pants, the color of a sun-kissed orange. Two jade bangles nestled on her right wrist, matching the pendant earrings that shivered ecstatically when she moved her head.

"Don't you ever come home, Al Wheeler?" she asked softly. "We've been sitting around all evening real lonesome, haven't we, Bobo?"

The mound of fur sprawled in her lap moved economically, and from somewhere inside there came a small, plaintive yapping sound.

"Dolores Keller," I said. "As I live and my dreams come true! How the hell did you get in here?"

She smiled lazily. "I told the janitor I was your cousin, just got into town unexpectedly from Monotonous, Montana, and he let me in. He also said you've got more cousins—"

Bobo raised his head suddenly and gave out with a growl that sounded almost doglike.

"You figure 'cousins' is a dirty word in dog language?" I asked interestedly.

"Like it is in janitor's language?" Dolores smiled sweetly. "Anyway—you finally made it. Aren't you going to offer me a drink or something?"

"Sure," I said. "Take your choice. Scotch on the rocks, with a dash of soda—the way I like it—or Scotch on the rocks?"

"Don't confuse me with detail," she said. "You make it—I'll drink it."

I got ice cubes and glasses from the kitchen, then made the drinks and took them over to the couch.

"I don't like asking personal questions," I said as I

sat down beside her, "but that pooch—is he house-trained?"

"Don't listen to his insults, honey boy!" Dolores crooned apologetically to the bundle of fur. "He can't recognize a gentleman when he sees one!"

She got up and carried Bobo over to the nearest armchair and lowered him into it gently. He whined reproachfully for a full five seconds, then relapsed into sleep again.

"You ever wonder if he got bitten by a tsetse fly sometime?" I queried.

"He can't adjust to night club hours, poor darling," she said as she sat down beside me again.

"Talking of night clubs—how come you're not working at the Extravaganza tonight?"

"Even a stripper gets a night off sometime," she said. "And here I've wasted it sitting around waiting for you."

"If I'd known you were coming I'd have been home early—and primed the hi-fi machine," I told her. "How come I'm so honored, so unexpectedly?"

"You were in a mad rush this afternoon out at Rovak's place, Al," she said wistfully. "All those beautiful things you said about me, and I didn't get to hear half enough!"

"You're kidding!" I said accusingly.

"Maybe—just a little."

She turned toward me, and the broad planes of her face were set in a suddenly serious mold, while her dark eyes watched me intently.

"The rest of it is something you said about Patty—that she was murdered?"

"That was the firm opinion of the sheriff's office this afternoon," I said gloomily. "But now I'm the only guy who still subscribes to the same theory."

"What happened to change everyone else's mind?" she asked curiously.

I told her about Stern, the note he'd left for me, and how Lavers figured that tied up everything nice and

neat. Her face tautened as she listened, and there was a somber look in her eyes when I'd finished.

"I don't believe it—Patty saying she was pregnant and threatening to kill herself if he didn't marry her," she said in a low voice. "She wasn't like that. She didn't have the kind of self-centered determination to play it that way. She was just a naïve kid who'd lived in the sticks all her life until she came to Pine City. He was lying, Al!"

"That's how I figure it, too," I agreed. "The only reason Harv had for writing that note was because somebody had a gun at his head while he wrote it. But I got to prove it—and that's the hard part, gorgeous!"

"I'll help you!" she said eagerly.

I looked at her doubtfully. "How come you suddenly got a big change of heart about the country cousin?" I asked. "The first time I saw you, it was one big joke—the lonely hearts club and all. You got a whole barrel-load of laughs out of it."

"I guess I was just trying to keep it that way," she whispered. "I was scared to let it get close enough to hurt me, Al. You can understand that?"

"Maybe," I said. "How do you figure on helping me?"

"I'll do anything you say," she said eagerly, "anything at all!"

"Don't tempt me!" I told her. "An ecdysiast who's built the way you're built shouldn't say things like that, or you'll find yourself shedding skin in no time at all!"

"Seriously, Al!" she said. "Tell me what I can do to help."

"Right now, I wouldn't even know," I confessed. "You could tell me about Rovak maybe? Did you know he's got fifty per cent of the Arkright Happiness Club?"

Dolores's eyes widened. "No, I didn't," she said flatly. "You think he had anything to do with Patty's death?"

"Not directly," I said truthfully. "But my guess is he knows a lot more than he's telling. There's some"

phony about that lonely hearts club, and Rovak being a half-owner, he must know what it is."

"I can't see any connection between the two of them—a lonely hearts club and a burlesque club?" Dolores said blankly. "Can you?"

"I can't see anything and that's the main reason I'm steadily losing my mind," I growled. "You ever hear of a guy called George Crocker?"

"No, not that I recall." She shook her head. "Where does he figure in this?"

"That's something else I don't know," I said. "What do you know about Loomas?"

"No more than I did the first time you asked me.

He works for Rovak—looks after his boat—comes into the club a lot." She shrugged gracefully. "That's about all."

"Was he an actor one time, do you know?"

"If he was, I never heard about it," she said. "I don't like him at all, not even one little bit of him. He's a woman-chaser but that only makes him a man. There's something else again, though—underneath all that bronzed muscle is a nasty, vicious streak of violence."

"He did a couple of years in San Quentin for mugging," I said. "You wouldn't figure a guy like that would know a boat from a bathtub. Does Rovak ever use it much?—or is it just tied up to that jetty the whole time, looking real pretty?"

"He uses it O.K.," Dolores said firmly. "He's away for a couple of days at a time about once a month—real deep sea stuff, I think."

"I guess it's no crime for Loomas to be a real sailor," I said sourly. "Maybe I should go back to the Ark-rights and start over." I climbed onto my feet wearily. "About here, we need another drink."

Back on the couch with fresh drinks, the line of questioning didn't look any more promising than before. I sat in silence, thinking but for a savage quirk of fate I could have been born with a kilt, and have spent a

short blissful life blending Scotch for home consumption instead of export to the bluidy Yanks.

"What you need is a change of pace, Al Wheeler," Dolores said suddenly in a brisk voice. "Think about something else for a while. How are you making out with that sultry sexpot you had with you at the club?"

"Sherry?" I said obviously. "She's got ambitions to become a stripper."

"My God!" Dolores croaked. "She needs help!"

"Not much," I said complacently. "She has all the right equipment. Last night she practiced a little up here for a while—one try and she's almost a professional!"

"It needs a pro to pick a pro!" Her voice was frozen around the edges. "I can understand you being dazzled at close-up range in your own apartment, naturally! You'd drool at the sight of anything female taking off her clothes in your own living room, of course!"

"I would not," I said, matching her quick-frozen voice with an iceberg quality in my own. "I also happen to be a pro—not in the same line of business of course," I added hastily, "but I definitely have an eye for that kind of thing."

"Oh, sure!" she said and laughed shortly. "Two eyes—both popping!"

"She made a pretty good job of all your routines." I sighed and slowly shook my head. "And this was her first time out, so to speak. But then I guess you pros get into a routine—and the routine gets kind of rigid as time goes by?"

"Rigid!" She leaped from the couch like she'd just been goosed by a gander. "I'll show you from rigid! You got some music?—any music?"

I made the hi-fi machine in one convulsive leap. "Anything at all," I told her airily. "How about the 'William Tell Overture'?—that'll shake any stiffness out of your points."

"Just put a record on the machine," she snarled, "and keep your fingers pressed tight against your eyeballs!"

In the middle of the rack was a long-playing record of a honky-tonk piano, strictly barrel-house style, and I suddenly realized I'd been saving it all these years for just this occasion. I put it on the machine carefully, lit a cigarette, then turned to watch Dolores go into action. For the first time in my life I knew exactly how a sultan felt the moment before he snapped his fingers.

Dolores took off her golden-thonged sandals and placed them neatly in front of the couch; unbuttoned her shirt almost absentmindedly, as she listened to the honky-tonk rhythm with deep concentration. Then the shirt fluttered onto the couch as gracefully as a matorador's cape, and was followed a moment later by her bra. She wriggled sinuously out of the skintight pants, tossed them carelessly on top of the small heap, then moved to the center of the carpet.

She stood motionless, her arms raised above her head with her fingers entwined, the overhead light giving a satin sheen to the flowing curves of her gorgeous body—naked except for a pair of white silk briefs. I slid onto the couch and sat waiting for the pro demonstration, with all that excited, uncertain yearning of adolescence right back with me—in spades.

Suddenly Dolores burst into action in a volcanic eruption of energy, her torso weaving and gyrating in a fantastic symmetry of motion that always kept in perfect time with the beat of the piano.

The forgotten cigarette burned down between my fingers as I watched spellbound. Her eyes were half closed and there was a look of something close to rapture on her downcast face, as her body performed the incredible, the unbelievable, and the impossible.

Straight burlesque is for the sex-starved and lonely—a succession of erotic bumps and grinds that range from the bawdy to the obscene—and finish up plain monotonous. But this was something I'd never seen before—a dance without the movements of a dancer, a paean of frank and sensual delight, the proud display of a perfectly molded torso controlled by an iron discipline. Maybe this was how they danced in a pagan temple

under the cruel and implacable eyes of their stone idols when the world was fresh.

Then—finally—the record ran out of music and Dolores' rippling curves gradually subsided until she stood motionless, poised like a pagan goddess hewn from thin-veined marble. Her arms dropped slowly to her sides and she shook her head suddenly as if she'd just awaked from a dream.

"I could use another drink after all that, Al Wheeler," she said conversationally, "and watch you don't tread on your eyeballs when you stand up!"

I tottered to my feet and walked rubber-legged across the room to where the Scotch and the rest of it stood on the table. Dolores was on the couch again when I returned with a glass in each hand, the only sign of any exertion being the steady rise and fall of her high full breasts as she breathed deeply and rhythmically.

"Thanks." She took the nearest glass out of my hand and drained the contents in one long swallow, tossed the empty glass, then took the second drink out of my other hand and dispatched the contents in the same minimum of time.

"Be my guest!" I said bitterly, then tossed the empty glasses over the back of the couch in a gesture that was designed to leave me both hands free that I have dramatic impact in the old-hat Russian style.

"How does your little serpent run now?" Dolores asked in a sleek, pantherish voice.

"Strictly an amateur," I said truthfully. "But the magnificent! Why don't you do that kind of thing as a regular routine in the club?—it would knock 'em dead!"

"Isn't there some brand new big stone on Walling pearls before swine?" she asked softly. "The strange ringside customer at the Emerald says he's going with just one thing in mind—and that's to get the

"I guess you're right," I commented. "How about a couple more drinks?—or maybe I could bring the bottle this time?"

"No more drinks, Al," she said with a smile.

more poetry—like that stuff you gave me this afternoon. Remember?"

"I remember," I told her. "Like you happen to be an exotic, ravishingly beautiful woman, with legs that are a sonnet of long-stemmed loveliness only to be compared with the geometric perfection of the rest of your delightful anatomy—which all adds up to a hundred-per-cent-plus desirability quotient—that kind of poetry?"

"That kind of poetry!" she whispered softly.

Her hands found mine and guided them gently until they cupped the heavy curves of her breasts. Her fingers squeezed suddenly, and the long nails dug painfully into the backs of my hands.

"You ever play charades, Al?" she asked in a low, husky voice. "Like somebody thinks of a word and somebody else has to act it out?"

"I guess so," I admitted. "I've played all kinds of games. This one sounds like a hangover from the kindergarten set."

"Not the way we're going to play it!" Her voice rippled with laughter. "I'm going to think of a word and you have to act it—O.K.?"

"There's nobody left to guess the answer," I protested.

"Who cares?" Her nails dug still deeper into the backs of my hands. "Right. You all set now, Al?"

"I guess there's a little kook in all of us," I said, sighing resignedly. "Sure—go ahead. What do I have to act?"

"That cute word you used the polite way—only this time let's take the alternative," she murmured. "Ravishing!"

"You mean you're going to put up a fight?" I objected.

"Only for a little while—you coward!" She pouted her full lower lip at me. "I tire very easily!"

It was a lie—well, a half-truth, anyway. Sure, she didn't put up much of a fight, but that jazz about her tiring easily—oh, brother!

MAYBE EVERY FAMILY HAS A PRIVATE AFFLICTION, BUT they don't talk about it outside their own four walls and the Wheelers are no exception. One member of the family in every third generation inherits the curse of the Wheelers, and in this one it had to be me. It's nothing real serious—just an occasional, sudden stabbing pain in the solar plexus which hits when it's least expected. I got it the next morning the moment I stepped into the outer office of the Arkright Happiness Club. The attacks have grown rarer as I get older and lately I'd figured maybe I'd outgrown it—a guy like me still having twinges of conscience—it's ridiculous.

But the twinge hit me the same moment I saw the welcoming smile on Sherry Rand's face, and heard the reproachful beat of native drums inside my head at the same time.

"Hello, Al honey," she said in that hibiscus-fragrant voice. "Where were you last night? I kind of figured you might call me."

For a moment I was tempted to tell her the truth, but what the hell? Dames are funny that way—I just knew she'd never understand that charades was just a game the way I played it with Dolores.

"I got involved, honey," I told her, which was nothing but the truth.

"I read about it in the morning papers." She shuddered faintly. "He was that fat little man with a carnation you spoke with at the burlesque club the other night, wasn't he?"

"That's right," I said. "Harvey Stern—one of life's little tragedies and all that jazz. Are the Arkrights busy dispensing happiness right now?"

"I'll tell them you're here," Sherry said. She lifted the phone, and a few seconds later told me I could go right on in. "Last night wasn't entirely wasted," she said enthusiastically. "I spent nearly three hours practicing my routines. I'd like for you to see the improvement, Al."

I could feel the dark circles under my eyes widen as she spoke.

"That sounds great, Sherry, real great," I said hoarsely. "I'll call you, huh?"

"Oh, sure!" she said coldly. "This don't-call-me-I'll-call-you, Wheeler, is a sudden change, isn't it? Or am I just another trophy pinned on your living room wall now?"

"It's just all this wet weather," I mumbled as I headed toward the Arkrights' office. "It kind of numbs vitality."

"It hasn't rained in a week!" she snapped.

"But that's only on the West Coast," I croaked, and escaped into the temporary sanctuary of the inner office.

Sarah Arkright was sitting stiffly in back of the desk, and Jacob Arkright was standing slightly behind her, his hand resting gently on her shoulder. Right then I began to wonder if they were real people at all. They could be wax dummies, wired internally with sound tapes, and each morning Sherry would dust them off first thing and they'd be all set for another day.

Jacob wore a different suit—a crumpled brown this time, and another jazzy tie with a pattern of pink dots against a purple background—and the small, tight knot looked more than ever like an angry boil on his high starched collar. He smiled nervously at me while his rimless glasses glittered with a high-polished benevolence.

"Good morning, Lieutenant," he said rustily. "We read about Harvey Stern—"

"In the morning papers?" I reproved him. "I trust

you're not contaminated by the standards of modern journalism?"

Sarah's angular face got a pinched look as she glared at me coldly. She'd changed the shapeless black dress for a shapeless blue dress and it was no improvement. I figured she sat the whole time because if she moved you'd hear the bones grating together, and that would be something nobody would want to hear before lunch, anyway.

"Now that the whole sad story of Patty Keller is finished," she said sharply, "perhaps you'll be good enough to return all the files you have that belong to this office, Lieutenant?"

"Sure," I nodded. "I'll have them sent around today—if the Sheriff hasn't sent them already. I was just wondering—did that George Crocker file turn up yet?"

"No," she said flatly, "it hasn't."

"I can't understand it, Lieutenant." Jacob shook his head bewilderedly. "I can't understand it at all. It's most irregular."

"More to the point," Sarah asked in that brittle voice, "is it of any further importance now?"

"I think so," I said easily. "But then I don't think either Patty Keller or Harvey Stern killed themselves."

Her faded blue eyes got a little more fuzzy around the edges as she stared at me. "Are you out of your mind?" she asked, and it sounded like a genuine question.

"But the papers said—they quoted Sheriff Lavers—" Jacob protested weakly. "I find this most confusing, Lieutenant!"

"You and me both!" I agreed fervently. "But that's my theory and I'm about to prove it. My guess now is that George Crocker's the key to the whole mystery—find him and I've found all the answers. I'd like to tell me all you remember about . . ."

They looked at each other

"Was he tall or short? thi

"Thin," Jacob said firmly

"Fat!" Sarah snorted.

"Tall," Jacob said.

"Short!" Sarah snapped.

"Let's try it another way," I pleaded. "Which one of you first interviewed him?"

They glared at each other for a long moment, then announced, "I did!" simultaneously.

"Maybe it was your silent partner who handled George Crocker for the club—Miles Rovak?" I suggested.

"That's absurd, he's never even been inside the office," Sarah said.

"I'd like to believe that, Mrs. Arkright," I said pleasantly, "but somehow I just can't bring myself to have explicit faith in your memory—or your husband's either."

"You have been both rude and objectionable on each occasion you've been inside this office, Lieutenant!" She leaned toward me, her bony fist gently pounding the desktop. "We will not tolerate it any longer. If you wish to speak to either of us again, at any time in the future, we shall insist on having our lawyer present. Good day, Lieutenant!"

"Sarah?" Jacob's voice quavered a little. "I don't think—"

"Exactly!" she snarled. "And you never have in the thirty-five years we've been married!"

The phone rang and she snatched the instrument up from the desk. "What is it?" She listened for a few seconds and the hollows in her cheeks were shaded a pallid blue color. "The stupid fool!" she said softly. "Why didn't he—? Never mind! Yes, I think you are right, it's the only thing you can do—increase the consignment by one. I'm busy right now so I'll have to call you back later."

She hung up and raised her tufted eyebrows a fraction. "Are you still here, Lieutenant?"

"One more question and I'm gone," I said. "Are you frightened of Rovak? Is that why your r suddenly fails when I ask questions about Crocker?"

She smiled thinly. "Your rudeness is equaled by your imagination, Lieutenant. That is ridiculous!"

I retraced my steps into the outer office. Sherry had her head bent over some papers and she didn't look up as I went past. It was a bleak, unfriendly world and if I hadn't been so goddamned tired, maybe I would have done something about it.

From the Arkright Happiness Club, I drove to the Lavers Lair for Lovelorn Lieutenants, but he wasn't in his office, and neither was Annabelle Jackson. I sat in a chair and smoked a couple of cigarettes; then a living monolithic slab shuffled in, a look of intense gloom set deep on its crudely chiseled face.

"A lousy morning, huh, Lieutenant?" Sergeant Polnik said dolefully. "All that work wasted. It ain't right—there ought to be a law against some bum knocking himself off and leaving a note that does honest, hard-working cops like us out of a job!"

"Without doubt there are thousands of honest, hard-working cops throughout the country," I observed coldly. "I don't think they include us, Sergeant."

"It was just a figment of speech, Lieutenant," he murmured. "I got hell from my old lady for being in so late last night and she wouldn't believe I was working the whole time." He scratched his head with an agrieved finger. "Then when I get in here this morning the Sheriff tells me it's all over and he don't even want to hear my report. He was shouting and waving his arms around like one of them Navy guys on a sinking ship or something—"

"Semaphoring?" I suggested.

"Some are—some ain't," Polnik said. "I always figure a guy is entitled to his own private life, Lieutenant! Like I was saying, the Sheriff's real mad. Says I'm just as bad as that no-good Lieutenant—you should forgive the expression, Lieutenant—wasting his time and the taxpayer's dough on a wild booze chase, he says!"

"Goose chase?"

"What the hell difference?" Polnik asked moodily. "I waste all day and half the night working my feet into

an early grave and all I get is a bawling out from my old lady and the Sheriff!"

"Things is tough all over, Sergeant," I sympathized. Then I suddenly remembered. "Hey! Wait a minute, you were checking all the dames listed on Harvey Stern's file, right?"

"For what good it done me!" he grunted.

"Sit down, Sergeant," I said briskly, pushing him into a chair. "Tell me all about it—don't miss a thing. No detail is too trivial."

"Lieutenant," Polnik said, peering at me dubiously, "you're ribbing me again?"

"Cross my heart!"

A slow smile spread across his repulsive face. "You really mean it? Cheez!" He gulped emotionally. "Thanks a million, Lieutenant. Well, the first dame on the list is a Galdys Vlotnik, and she lives out on Casey Street, but when I get there—

I had no place else to go and nothing to do but listen to him, and that was just as well, because Polnik was the conscientious type cop. If he walked down a street just once, he could tell you the exact color of the curtains in all the windows—and insisted on telling.

He'd drawn a blank on the first four names from the list—none of them were living at the same addresses any more. They'd all moved, leaving no forwarding addresses. The fifth had been a middle-aged schoolteacher who'd had hysterics at the first mention of the Arkright Happiness Club and the name of Harvey Stern, then had driven Polnik out of her apartment with the sharp end of an umbrella.

"I figured she was a little—you know, Lieutenant?" Polnik tapped the side of his head significantly, and the sound it made was reminiscent of the homing call of a woodpecker. "Anyways, the next one was a real dish—Lola Lundy. She's a hooper in one of the downtown night clubs and she was sleeping when I pushed the buzzer. I guess she just got straight out of bed and opened the door." Polnik blushed at the happy memory. "She was wearing one of them chemises like spun

glass, you know? One look and you got the dame tabbed right down to her birthmarks. And a funny thing about that dame—talking of birthmarks—”

“Leave us not discuss the more delicate secrets of Lola’s anatomy, Sergeant!” I pleaded. “Did she tell you anything interesting about the lonely hearts club?”

“Yeah, a whole lot,” he said feelingly. “It was around three in the afternoon when I got there, but she hadn’t had breakfast yet, what with her working such late hours and all. So she opened a bottle of Canadian Club and—”

“For breakfast?”

“She said it helped keep up her strength,” he said defensively. “Then she invited me to join her, and after that we got to talking and before I knew it, the bottle was empty, it was dark outside and she was still talking.” The light faded regretfully from his eyes. “I never did get that dame to stop goddamn well talking!”

“What did she say!” I grated.

“Say? Oh, yeah—the Arkright Happiness Club? Well, she’d just gotten into town—this was six months back—and she was all alone and she wanted some guys to take her out and show her a good time. So she joined up with the club.”

“Maybe she had her back teeth filled at the dentist’s, too?” I snarled. “I want to know about Harvey Stern and that’s all—you understand, Sergeant?”

“Well, O.K. But you said not to leave nothing out, never mind how stupid, Lieutenant! Yeah—Stern? She figured he was a creep with wandering hands worse than—” Polnik blinked rapidly. “—well, wandering hands. And he kept on wanting to find out if she had any dough in the bank the whole time, so after the second date with him, she gives him the bum’s rush.”

“And that’s all about Stern?”

“That’s all about Stern,” he agreed placidly.

“Maybe we can save ourselves a little time here,” I said slowly. “Did any of the others say anything more about Stern than Lola did?”

“No, Lieutenant. A couple more said about the same.

He seemed like he was more interested in any dough they might have than he was in them."

"Well, thanks, anyway." I bared my teeth at him, and hoped it would pass for a smile, but the way he reared back said it didn't.

"There was one dame who's dead now," he volunteered hopefully. "She got married—some guy she met through the club, the old bat who owned the apartments told me—and she was killed in an auto accident in New Mexico three weeks later."

"What was her name?"

"I got it right here, Lieutenant." He thumbed laboriously through his notebook until he found the right entry. "Yeah—Joan Penton."

"Was that her married name?"

"I guess not—the old bat never did find out the name of the little fat guy she married."

"Little fat guy?" I prodded him. "Did the old bat say anything else about him?"

"She didn't like the look of him at all." Polnik shook his head sadly. "Dressed too neat for an honest man, she said, with that carnation in his buttonhole and all."

"None of the others either married or dead?"

"Not the ones I talked to. But I guess the first four I never got to see could be either married, or dead, or both, huh?"

"I guess they could, at that," I said. "Thanks, Sergeant. Nobody mentioned a guy called Crocker—George Crocker—by any chance?"

"Crocker? Oh, sure—Lola talked about him all the time. She figured she was crazy for the guy until one night he tried to talk her into going for a weekend cruise on his boat, and then got real nasty when she refused. The way she tells it, he tossed her into his car and said she was going anyway, but he had to stop for a red light about a mile out of town and she dived out the car and ran. She never saw him again after that, she said, and didn't want to, either. Is this Crocker important, Lieutenant?"

"The way I figure it, he is," I said. "What else did you get on him from Lola?"

"Nothing much," he admitted. "She was too busy drinking all the time and telling me to keep my hands—anyway, she didn't talk much about Crocker after telling me how he turned nasty in the war that last time."

"She must have said something ~~more like that~~" I growled desperately. "What was ~~the Captain~~ he had a boat for weekend cruising? A ~~fisherman~~—a fisherman?—what?"

"That's right!" Polnik slapped his forehead and watched expectantly to see if he had guessed right or didn't. "He was a great big handsome fellow," she said, and he was an actor."

"Thanks, Sergeant," I said ~~_____~~ ~~_____~~ ~~_____~~
a big help!"

"I have?" His forehead _____
tried to figure out why. _____
time wasn't wasted. Lie _____

"Sure," I said. "How about this morning?"

"No," he said, "she was just late getting up. She's about thirty and get over to the office or something."

I reached for the phone and just as I was about to dial Annabelle's apartment the door opened and a woman came in for a couple of minutes. I was so startled that I forgot the sudden painful twinge in my side. I was so startled that Annabelle had gone out on her own. I was so startled that the lonely hearts club the night before last had been Wheeler.

"Drop over to her apartment and see if there's something," I told Polnik, and he went. "If she's not home, check with the neighbors around and find out if anyone's been in there." "Sure," he said and started to go when the phone rang. I lifted it and said, "Hello, Alice," into the mouthpiece.

"I'd like to talk with Miss Annabelle Jackson please?" a crisp feminine voice said.

"She's not in today," I told the voice.

"Oh?" She hesitated for a moment. "Then come me with Lieutenant Wheeler, please!"

"This is Wheeler speaking."

"I'm Jenny Carter," the voice said heatedly, "Annabelle's roommate—and I'd like to know just what you've done with her, Lieutenant!"

"I haven't done a thing with her, Jenny," I said, "and I never knew she had a roommate."

"Since a couple of months back." She chuckled briefly. "That's after your time, I think, Lieutenant."

"I guess that's right," I said. Annabelle doesn't seem to trust me any more for some peculiar reason."

"For five distinctly sound reasons," she said briskly. "She told me them—one by one. But seriously, I'm worried about her—she didn't come home at all last night. What have you done with her, Lieutenant?"

"I haven't done anything with her, Jenny!" I protested. "Believe me—I was about to send a sergeant out to the apartment to check if she was there or not."

"But she was out working for you last night!" she said accusingly. "She told me something about it—some crazy idea of yours that she should join this lonely hearts club. She went out on her first blind date from the club last night and she never came back. And now you say you don't even know what's happened to her?"

"Take it easy," I told her. "We'll find out all right. There's probably some logical explanation—"

"—Like she's been murdered!" Jenny Carter screamed hysterically.

"Like she met some wonderful guy and they went to Reno and got married," I yelled. "You stop worrying. We'll call you just as soon as we've got a line on Annabelle." Then I hung up on her quickly before I got some more hysterics.

Polnik looked at me inquiringly. "Was that about Miss Jackson, Lieutenant?"

"Her roommate," I said shortly. "Annabelle hasn't

been home all night. There's no need for you to go out to the apartment now, but there's something else you can do for me."

"You name it, Lieutenant," he said humbly.

"Go around to the Arkright Happiness Club right away," I told him. "Tell them your name is Jackson and you're Annabelle's older brother. Tell them she went out on her first date from the club and she hasn't been home since, and unless they find out what happened to her right away, you're going to the police."

"Me—a cop—go to the police?" Point's face fell.

"You aren't supposed to be a cop," I said. "You're just her older brother—you can be a telephone operator if you want!"

"Cheez! You figure I could be a ~~telephone operator~~" he asked hopefully.

"Why not?" I said hopelessly.

"Thanks, Lieutenant!" Point's face fell with pride. "That's what I always wanted to be when I was a kid. If only Mom could see me now."

POLNIK GOT BACK TO THE OFFICE AROUND THREE IN THE afternoon, with a look of misery on his face.

"It was no good, Lieutenant," he said apologetically. "I did like you said and the receptionist—Cheez! what a dame that one is!—took me right in to the Arkrights. I gave them the spiel and banged the desk a couple of times to make it look good, but they swore I must have the wrong happiness club, they didn't know from any Annabelle Jackson. We argued for maybe a half hour with me saying I knew for sure this was the right club, and them saying I had to be wrong. They offered to let me search their files and I did—but there was nothing there with Miss Jackson's name on it." He shrugged his gorilla shoulders. "So then I didn't know what the hell to do so I came back here." He looked at me with sublime faith. "I figured you'd tell me what to do next."

"I wish I knew," I said bitterly. "You did all you could down there—it's no fault of yours, Sergeant. Pleading no knowledge of Annabelle was the obvious out for them."

"Does the Sheriff know yet?" he asked.

"He hasn't been back," I said. "I guess that meeting's going to take all day."

"He's over in City Hall," Polnik said eagerly. "You want me to go over there right now and tell him, Lieutenant?"

"No!" I said sharply. I remembered how Lavers had reacted to my idea of getting Annabelle to join the lonely hearts club in the first place. Now that he was

convinced the case was sewn up tight by Stern's confession, his reaction to the news of Annabelle's disappearance would be violent. I didn't see how he could help, anyway, and I had enough problems without adding the County Sheriff to them.

"So what do we do now, Lieutenant?" Polnik's raspy voice broke my train of thought. "You was just kidding when you said you didn't know, huh?"

I wondered fleetingly if a jury would bring in justifiable homicide if I shot him where he stood. "I'm thinking, Sergeant," I muttered hoarsely. "Even for a Wheeler, it takes a little time."

The phone rang and I grabbed it.

"Lieutenant Wheeler?" a husky feminine voice asked.

"That's me," I snarled, and thought if this was Jenny Carter I'd find out where she was, then go around here and throttle her with my bare hands.

"All!" The voice was so faint I could only just hear it. "This is Dolores."

"Hi," I said bleakly. "I can hardly hear you."

"I'm calling from the Extravaganza," she said. "I can't speak any louder in case somebody hears me. Do you remember our talk last night? We talked for a while, now I could hear"

"There's a bar two blocks south of the Extravaganza called the Bird of Paradise. I'll be there at five, or a little after."

"O.K.," I said. "And thanks a million, honey."

"See you in the Bird of Paradise," she said, and hung up.

I put the phone down and looked at Polnik. "I just got a lead, I think," I told him. "It's going to take a while to follow through. Meantime I want you to run a check on the dame who married Harvey Stern and then got killed in an auto accident. What was her name?"

"Joan Penton?"

"If it was Stern, it's likely he didn't use his real name, and they probably got married in Nevada," I said. "Sweat on it, Sergeant—this may be the first concrete piece of evidence we can get. I want to know where they were married, and under what name—the details of the auto accident—and whether the girl left any money and who got it—and was she insured and if so, who collected that?"

"O.K., Lieutenant," Polnik said and nodded ponderously. "I'll get onto it right now."

"I'll be gone I don't know how long," I said. "When the Sheriff gets back you'd better tell him what's happened."

"What will I say when he asked where the—where you are, Lieutenant?"

"Tell him I went out," I said. "But if he doesn't hear from me by midnight to contact the Coast Guard and have them look for a forty-foot cabin cruiser, registered under the name of Miles Rovak."

The Sergeant scribbled frantically in his notebook, then looked at me blankly. "What if they find this boat and you ain't on it, Lieutenant?"

"Don't say things like that!" I shuddered. "Every time I get to feeling a dedicated cop, somebody always has to louse it up for me real good! If I'm not on board that boat, it's likely I'll be gone for around three weeks

"Two doubles?" he said.

"In spades," I answered, and I detected the shadow of a smirk on his gray face. He double-checked her blouse size, re-echoed my order in a murmur of sheer disbelief, and managed to stumble his way back to the bar.

"What's with him?" Dolores said as she slid onto the leatherette seat beside me.

"That's the trouble—nobody." I smiled at her and she smiled back warmly.

"It's nice to see you again so soon, honey," she murmured. "I washed the dishes after you'd gone this morning—so your apartment's real neat and tidy."

"It's always been my dream," I said in a hushed voice. "A passionate affair with a girl who was real domesticated. A dame who could look sexy in an apron, with her hair in curlers and—"

The waiter served the drinks, putting one glass in front of Dolores, then hesitating for a moment as he saw the untouched first drink still in front of me. He looked back and forth between us, and then just back and forth between Dolores till I wondered if he was considering her cleavage as a likely spot to deposit the Scotch. Finally he placed the glass about an eighth of an inch in front of her, as a kind of oblation.

Dolores shoved it over to my side. "What's the matter with that guy anyway? He gives me the creeps—he must be a kook or something," she said.

"You meet all kinds," I shrugged away the problem. "Tell me some more about this boat ride that's scheduled for tonight."

"I don't know much more than I told you over the phone, Al," she said. "I was passing Rovak's office—the door wasn't all the way shut and I heard their voices, so I stopped to listen. Like I told you, Rovak told Loomas to have the boat ready to leave tonight and be sure to have the consignment loaded by ten—and they'd be gone a couple of days. 'The usual run,' he said. Whatever that is."

"Anything else?"

"Sure! I figure we don't want to get out there too early. For one thing we want to be sure Rovak's already there—and he might get suspicious about my sudden recovery, too. I thought after we've had a couple of drinks here we could get a meal, then leave around eight. That would get us out there around eight-thirty, in plenty of time before the boat leaves."

"That makes sense," I agreed. "Maybe you really are X-9, and that X denotes the only female operative in the whole counterespionage network, authorized to carry a blowpipe for lethal purposes! You think we'll need a password and countersign?—something like 'Take it off!' as the password, with the countersign, 'Cheez! Put it back!'"

"Al Wheeler!" she said giggling helplessly. "You're the craziest guy I ever met, and I don't believe you're a cop for one moment! You're a retired vaudeville comic practicing some new routines for your comeback!"

We followed Dolores' timetable pretty close—a couple more drinks in the bar, then a steak in the chophouse around the corner. It was near enough to eight o'clock when we got into her four-year-old hardtop and started out.

A half-hour later we came over the crest of the road that seemed to drop almost perpendicularly down the side of a cliff to where Rovak's house nestled right at the bottom. Dolores braked the car to a stop on the crest, then turned and smiled at me nervously.

"Now I get butterflies," she said throatily. "You think maybe now is the time for you to disappear into the back seat, Al? We'll be there in a couple of minutes."

"Sure," I said. "But we made good time and there's no real hurry, so why don't we talk for a few minutes first? Cigarette?"

"Thanks." She switched off the motor, then slid a cigarette out of the pack I offered her. I lit it, and one for myself, then leaned back against the upholstery. I put my free arm around her shoulders, letting my fingers brush gently against the taut curve of her left

breast under the cotton dirndl. She sighed gently and snuggled closer to me.

"It's a beautiful night," I said. "But no moon—I guess maybe that's why Rovak picked it."

"So he's got less chance of being seen?" Dolores murmured against my shoulder. "That doesn't sound like his boat trip is very legal does it?"

"I was wondering," I said lazily, "just how Miles has it figured—the iron gates left open so you can drive right in and park well down on the driveway close to the house. Rovak and Loomas waiting in the shadows on either side, so when you stop the car they each open one of the back doors and ram a gun into my face. After that I join Annabelle Jackson as extra loading for the consignment, and the boat takes off on schedule. Then sometime in the early hours of the morning they dump us into the ocean, and the operation's a complete success."

Her body stiffened suddenly. "Al—what are you talking about? Have you gone out of your mind?"

"It was a nice try, honey," I said. "You wait around my apartment last night until I get home with a double-barreled excuse—one, you've had a change of heart and now you're grieving for your cousin Patty real bad and you want to help justice—and two, you're just crazy about Wheeler, anyway. What you really wanted to know was had I swallowed Stern's fake suicide and the note he'd written tidying up everything so nicely."

"You can't mean that, Al?" she said in a choked voice. "After all I've done to—"

"I don't know how Annabelle suddenly got to be a problem," I went on, "but she obviously did. And you had one other problem, too—that was me. So the smart thing was to take care of both at the same time. That meant getting me onto the boat with no fuss—and no county sheriff hot on my trail. When you heard my sergeant had been around to the lonely hearts club, making like he's Annabelle's brother and not getting anyplace, you gave him time to report back to me. Then you called at the psychological moment and gave

me a lead which would bring me right out to Rovak's boat of my own free will."

"I don't know how you can even think such things Al Wheeler!" she said in a muffled voice. "It's all lies—dreadful lies!"

"I told you once, Dolores honey, that it was your intelligence that appealed to me most of all about you," I reminded her. "You should have remembered that—then maybe you wouldn't have played it so awful dumb the way you did in the bar tonight. All that little-girl jazz about cops with Tommy guns and tear gas surrounding the house—it was a clumsy way of handling it. But then, of course, you could've figured I was as dumb as I look?"

"I need a handkerchief!" she said in a muffled voice and picked up her purse from the seat beside her.

She had the gun halfway out before I clamped my hand over her fingers and squeezed until she whimpered with pain and relaxed her grip so the gun slid back inside the purse.

"Too bad," I said respectfully. "A natural reaction. Any dame that's crying needs a handkerchief—and you didn't rush it, either."

"Oh, shut up!" she snarled. "And take your stinking paws off of me!"

I took my arm from around her shoulders, lifted her purse and the car keys in one hand, and opened the car door on her side with the other. "Out!" I told her, and gave her a shove of encouragement.

She turned and looked at me contemptuously when we were both standing beside the car.

"What now?" she sneered. "We wait for reinforcements?"

"Take off your shoes," I told her. She hesitated for a moment, then did as she was told. "Now the dress and the slip," I said.

"Wait a minute!" she said angrily. "I'm not—"

"If you don't, I'll rip them off," I said casually. "Come to think of it, it could be more fun that way!"

Dolores had the dress pulled over her head almost

before I'd finished talking. Then the slip followed and that left her in a strapless bra and a pair of briefs. She shivered suddenly in the slight breeze that came in off the ocean as I tossed her clothes and shoes into the back of the car.

"And there it is, nature girl," I told her as I got back into the car. "Here's your big chance to run barefoot in the breeze, over turf and glen!"

"You dirty sonovabitch!" she said from between clenched teeth.

"Dolores—honey!" I said reproachfully as I started the motor again. "You always said you were crazy about poetry!"

I let the car roll down the hill slowly in second while I eased the thirty-eight out of its belt holster and put it on the seat beside me. As the car neared the bottom of the hill, I flicked the headlight beams on high, and their brilliant light showed that the iron gates across the driveway were wide open. I drove slowly into the driveway and saw the Mercedes parked about thirty feet ahead. If Rovak and Loomas were where I figured they had to be—one on either side of the driveway—the headlights would blind them enough so they couldn't distinguish who was driving the car. So I was seen and I stopped and that gave me a whole time or two seconds. Just enough time to ease the car into gear a little, and pick up the thirty-eight.

I braked the car to a stop a few feet in front of the Mercedes, then flung the door wide open and jumped out as I heard the sudden clatter of footsteps on either side of the car. Both the back doors were slammed open and I heard Rovak's harsh voice shout "You cop! Come out nice and easy!"

By that time I'd straightened up and was in the massive bulk of Steve Loomas. Loomas stepped in and leaned into the back of the car.

"Hey, boss!" he yelled. "The cop's here!"

"You're so right, George!" I said. "I'll be in the barrel of the thirty-eight again!"

"Tell Rovak to drop his gun or I'll splatter your brains over the upholstery!"

"Boss!" Loomas stuttered wildly. "Don't—"

The sudden explosion of Rovak's gun was shatteringly loud inside the confines of the car. I'd taken the obvious precaution of standing right in back of Loomas, and Rovak had no way of getting at me except through that massive-muscled body, but that wasn't about to deter him. He fired three shots from his side of the car, and Loomas' whole body quivered as each slug slammed into his chest. Then he toppled forward slowly into the back seat, and as his bulk fell away from me, Rovak's silhouetted head suddenly appeared in my line of vision. I guess he saw me at the same time because he fired another shot, making the mistake of not elevating his gun quickly enough, so the slug took Loomas neatly between the eyes—but you can only kill a man once and Loomas was already dead before that slug hit.

I lifted the thirty-eight carefully and squeezed the trigger twice. Rovak screamed thinly and spun around, then disappeared out of my line of sight. I heard the clatter as his gun dropped on the driveway, and raced around the back of the car toward him.

When I got there he was down on his hands and knees, and there was a steady splashing sound as an ever-widening pool appeared on the concrete beneath his bowed head. His gun lay a few feet away, and I kicked it into the bushes lining the driveway, then put my hand on his shoulder.

"Rovak?" I said. "Where are you hit?"

He pulled his shoulder away from my hand violently, then suddenly his arms splayed sideways and he pitched forward onto his face and lay still. I knelt down and turned him over gently; he was already dead, and there was nothing recognizable left of his face below the forehead.

I got to my feet and raced toward the front door of the house and found it was slightly open when I got there. I slammed it wide open with my foot and yelled, "Outside, you guys, and fast! Rovak's got trouble!" Then

THE STRIPPER

I flattened myself against the wall beside the door and waited.

Heavy footsteps clumped down the hallway. A moment later a hairy, muscle-bound gorilla lumbered out of the doorway and past me, heading toward the car. I caught up with him in a couple of steps and slammed the gun barrel down across the back of his head. He got tired of running all at once and collapsed to the ground. I got back to the door in a few seconds again and waited another thirty seconds. The door finally came out.

A closer inspection revealed the man who was my old buddy, Louis, the mafioso. He was a big, fat, black man, and it got to be like old times. He looked like he was going to wake up, so I left him while I searched the room. The room was deserted, and it made me feel like there had only been the three of us. When I got back to the door, I heard a grunting painfully as he struggled in his position. I nudged his left ear with the gun. He stopped grunting right away.

"Rovak and Loomas are here," he said. "I'd as soon have you here as they. It'd be neater that way. So I'll try something, huh, so I'll try something."

He squinted up at me on the short, squat neck.

"Don't kill me, Lieberman," he said. "I'll do anything you say—anything."

"Get up on your feet," I said. "The boat."

"I don't know what you mean," he said. He bled as he staggered to his feet.

"That does it!" I said.

"Wait!" he screamed. "I'm a consignment's already been sent to the tenant!"

"So let's go unload the gun to emphasize the point."

We walked down the jetty, then climbed on board the cruiser's immaculate white deck.

"Where are they?" I asked.

"Down below—locked in the cabin," Louis mumbled.

"You got a key?"

"Yeah—right here." He pulled a key chain out of his pocket and handed it to me.

"That's good, Louis," I said approvingly. "You keep going this way and you could live another whole ten minutes yet!"

I made him go first down the ladder that led to the cabin, and followed behind, but not too close. When we got there I gave him back the key, let him unlock the door and lead the way inside. The consignment had been loaded all right. Directly opposite us, with their backs pressed hard against the bulkhead, were three cowering girls—and the one in the middle was Annabelle Jackson.

She saw the gun in my hand and made a rapid recovery.

"Well," she sniffed, "if it isn't Al Wheeler! You sure took your time about getting here."

"I would've made it a lot sooner," I said apologetically, "but your roommate was so upset the way you just disappeared, I had to comfort her."

"Jenny?" Annabelle said suspiciously.

"There we were," I said nostalgically, "sitting in your apartment with me busy comforting Jenny—and Jenny busy being comforted. The hours just flew!"

"Jenny?" she snarled.

"Tell me something, honey chile," I asked. "How come they picked you for a phony so fast?"

"A little elementary psychology, Lieutenant," she said coldly, "which you apparently overlooked. Every girl tries to make the best of her looks—so if one girl deliberately tries to make the worst of them, she obviously must have a good reason. After they grabbed me, they checked at City Hall and found out who I worked for. So then that dreadful man—Rovak—said I could be useful two ways."

"You'd fetch a good price as part of this consignment," I said, "and he could use you as bait for me."

Annabelle looked annoyed. "How did you know?"

"Elementary psychology, honey chile," I said easily. "Just one more question before we go back to the house and call up the posse. Who did you see when you registered with the lonely hearts club? The receptionist—Sherry Rand?"

"No," Annabelle shook her head. "She was out to lunch when I got there—so Mrs. Arkright interviewed me, then organized the first date with that muscle-bound beast, George Crocker!"

"Alias Steve Loomas," I said brightly, "and speak softly of the dead."

"You killed him?" Her eyes widened as she stared at me in horror.

"What's the fun in being a hero if you can't leave a few dead villains lying around?" I said reasonably. "I'm glad Sherry Rand isn't involved in this."

"Another of your conquests—hero?" she asked icily.

"Only one on this case, honey chile." I smiled sweetly at her. "Being so busy with Jenny didn't leave me much time."

IT HAD GOTTEN TO BE A REAL LATE NIGHT WHAT WITH THE explanations to the County Sheriff and the sheer bliss of watching the changing expressions on his face while he listened. He almost took the two corpses in his stride after that, but they never really worried me because I knew ballistics would prove Rovak had killed Loomas and not me. The best of it was watching Laver's face when we stopped at the top of the hill on the way back to town and picked up a gorgeous strawberry blonde whose lusty curves were hardly concealed by a small bra and miniature briefs. She was huddled on the side of the road, shivering violently and blue with cold when we stopped. The Sheriff's eyes had popped out of his head when she climbed into the car and snuggled up against him for some warmth. Finally he'd gotten his voice back and glared at me wildly, then asked huskily just how many more near-nude females had I left scattered around the countryside.

So, even if I was tired, it was still a bright and sunny morning after the long night when I stepped once again into the offices of the Arkright Happiness Club. Sherry Rand's face was stony when she looked up and saw me, and I didn't even hear one faint twang of an Hawaiian guitar in the background.

"Lieutenant Wheeler," she said icily, "you know, I was stupid enough to think you might really call me last night—that shows just how naïve I can get, doesn't it?"

"I was busy, honey," I said regretfully. "Real busy!"

"Funny thing," she said through a yawn. "I didn't

read about it in the morning papers."

"But you will," I said cheerfully. "Are the Arkwrights at home?"

"Sure," she said. "I'll tell them you're here."

"This time you don't need to bother, Sandy honey," I told her. "I'll announce myself."

I opened the door of the private office and stepped inside. Sarah Arkwright was sitting in front of her desk as ever, but Jacob had pulled a stool up to her and was perched beside her—in a smaller chair, naturally—and they looked like they were going over the monthly accounts.

Sarah's eyes widened for a moment when she first saw me, then the frown spread quickly over the outer edges across her pupils, leaving two opaque masks to hide her thoughts.

"This is beyond all tolerance!" she snapped. "Don't you even have the decency to wait until you're invited into a private office before you walk in here?"

"I must say," Jacob put in his squeaky voice, "this is hardly a civilized attitude, Mrs. Arkwright."

"You might as well be used to uncivilized manners," I said easily. "When you're going, you'll see us again them all the time."

I pulled a chair away from the wall and sat down facing them, then lit a cigarette.

"Put that disgusting thing out immediately," Sarah's gaunt cheeks flamed a violent red. "How dare—"

"The consignment never got away last night," I said conversationally. "Rovak killed Lester—and killed Rovak. Louis and Dolores Keller are here now and they spent most of the night talking last night at the D.A.'s office downtown. You mind?"

Jacob's skin turned a dirty gray when he looked at me. His mouth dropped open as wide as the store teeth that had given him such trouble these last thirty or so years suddenly gave up effort and the top plate collapsed onto the bottom with an uneasy clacking sound.

Sarah stiffened her back into an even more upright position in her chair, if that were possible. Her bony fingers intertwined, then locked solid with a brittle sound.

"We shall consult our lawyer—of course!" she said firmly, then looked at her husband for approval for the first time in her life; but he didn't even notice—he was too busy with one hand shielding his mouth, making frantic gobbling noises as he tried to juggle that top plate back into position again.

"A nice racket you had going here for a while," I said, "making it all ways—even legitimately. Miles Rovak had a hot connection with the Latin American bordello trade, and they were always willing to pay big money for girls who were young and preferably blonde. With Loomas, or George Crocker—whatever name you prefer—dazzling the girls with his muscles and finally persuading them to come cruising on his boat, that side of the deal was sewn up real fine."

"Not a word," Sarah said in a cracked voice. "Not a word until we consult with our lawyer!"

"Sure," I said and nodded politely. "Then you had Stern working the older clients—the middle-aged spinsters who were getting even more lonely and more foolish. If he couldn't con them out of their hard-earned money any other way, he'd even marry them. Of course afterwards he'd take some insurance on their lives, and if they were fortunate enough to sustain a fatal accident on their honeymoon—well, that's life, kids, ain't it?"

"We got the detail on Joan Penton—the late Joan Penton, I should say. It wasn't really so tough for Stern that Rovak forced him to write that note to me, then killed him, because Stern couldn't have lived very much longer anyway. And a bullet's preferable to the gas chamber, I always say. What do you say, Mrs. Arkright—Mr. Arkright?"

Sarah licked her lips which were white around the edges and said nothing; Jacob still struggled with his teeth and moaned softly to himself the whole time—but not about the teeth, I guessed.

"Dolores told us all about Patty—her country cousin from the sticks who got under her feet the whole time," I went on amiably. "How the fool kid would stick her nose into other people's business. How she was stage-struck and wanted to be a great actress. How she sneaked up close to a door that wasn't properly closed one night when she was staying in Dolores' apartment, and overheard a confidential conversation between Dolores and Rovak concerning the Latin American trade."

I shook my head admiringly. "That Patty! Whatever else you can say about her, you have to admit she was single-minded. She offered a trade—her silence in return for the organization making her into a big star! I guess you have to be just out of the sticks to offer that kind of deal!"

My cigarette had burned down to a stub and there wasn't an ash tray in the room, so I walked across to the desk and dropped the butt into the vase of withered carnations. It made a faint, squelching hiss as it hit the water and it sounded an adequate requiem for good old Harv—the guy who always had a carnation in his buttonhole.

"When she was standing out on that hotel ledge, I talked with her through the window," I said. "She didn't look like she was going to jump at all. The only thing that interested her was the time—she kept on asking what time it was every few minutes. When it got around to three o'clock, she said she'd come back in. She started toward me, then the nausea hit her and she lost her balance and fell. The autopsy revealed the shot of apomorphine—you know that?"

"Not a word without consulting our . . ." Sarah's voice shook so much she couldn't finish the sentence.

"When Dolores told us about Patty's deal—that she'd keep quiet about your white slave trade as long as you made her a big star—" I shrugged "then it hit me. She was just a naïve country kid who didn't know from nothing. It would be easy—real easy—to con her into thinking a fake suicide attempt would land her on the front pages of all the newspapers and launch her into a

successful acting career. Once she was convinced that all she had to do was stand on a narrow ledge for a certain length of time and then climb back into the window again, it would be just as easy to convince her she ought to have an injection before she went out there—to steady her nerves.”

“My guess is,” I went on, “that you told her it would take, say, a good solid half hour on that ledge to make a real impression on the public—it didn’t matter much what precise length of time you advised as long as it allowed more than enough time for the injection to take effect. But when she got out there, five minutes seemed like about five years to her, and when she saw the crowd that had collected, she figured she could cut short the time and come back in sooner. I was there and saw her make that decision—but she made it about ten seconds too late.”

I put my hands on the edge of the desk and leaned on them.

“Which one of you sold the idea to Patty Keller?” asked softly. “Which one was it who pushed the needle into her arm and deliberately gave her the apomorphine, knowing that the violent reaction was bound to send her over the edge?”

Jacob dropped his head, showing the gleaming whiteness of his skull, with the heavy hair tonic plastering the last remnants of his hair tight against it.

“It was wrong,” he mumbled, and tears trickled down his cheeks in a token of remorse that was too late by one hell of a large margin. “Wrong! I never really did agree to getting rid of that child in that way, Sarah, you know it!”

“Oh—stop sniveling!” Sarah said contemptuously. The bones in her hands cracked as she unlocked the fingers. “Yes, Lieutenant, everything you’ve said is true. It was my idea to persuade that stupid girl to get out onto the ledge—and it was I who gave her that injection!”

“You sound like you’re proud of it,” I said wonderingly.

"You don't understand!" she said fiercely. "You're like the rest of them, hidebound with a stupid, sentimental morality that divorces human beings from any real contact with one another. In every city throughout the whole world, there are millions of desperate, pathetic people, cut off completely from any real contact with any other human. The lonely, Lieutenant—"

"—are legend!" I finished it for her. "I should have known that wasn't one of Dolores' original phrases!"

"That was why we started out Happiness Club in the first place," she said proudly. "To help the lonely, the lost and afraid little people of the earth! What could a stupid little moron like Patty Keller hope for in her life?—nothing! I did her a kindness—a great and wonderful kindness. She went from the ecstasy of seeing her dreams start to come true—as she thought—into almost instant and peaceful oblivion.

"The girls who took our cruise, Lieutenant? All of them were lonely and afraid—why else would they come to us in the first place? None of them would find a decent husband—there are not enough men to go around, let alone decent men! We sent them where they would enjoy contact with more men than they'd ever dreamed of in their wildest moments. We sent them where they could work for their pleasure and enjoy the most intimate of human contacts incessantly until—"

Her voice had been rising steadily as she spoke, until it finally broke into a high-pitched scream.

"Sarah!" Jacob gripped her arm imploringly, with a vigor that was a far cry from the family photo album, circa 1927. "Sarah, dear—please, don't do that!"

She stared down with incredulous horror at him for a moment, as if she had never seen it before. She thrust it violently away from her.

"Don't you dare touch me!" she screamed at him. "You filthy, vile creature! Don't you dare touch me! In the thirty years of our married life, I've never allowed you to touch me! So don't you dare think that—"

Her eyes dulled suddenly and she slumped back into

the chair, just as Lavers and a uniformed cop came charging into the room.

"What the hell goes on in here, Wheeler?" the Sheriff asked quickly. "We could hear her screaming—"

"She's only fainted," I said. "She confessed to the Keller girl's murder. She sold her the idea that standing out on a ledge, pretending to be about to throw herself over, would make a wonderful publicity story for an aspiring young actress—and she gave her the shot of apomorphine. But I don't think we'll ever get a conviction, Sheriff." I turned to Polnik, "Call an ambulance," I told him, "And tell them they'll probably need a restrainer along, too."

"Poor Sarah—the excitement's been too much for her!" Jacob cackled suddenly. "Maybe I'm the strong one, after all!"

I walked out of the office and closed the door behind me. I took time out to light a cigarette before I went over to Sherry's desk.

"Honey doll," I said, grinning warmly at her. "Tonight is definitely and irrevocably a free night for Wheeler. How about dropping over to my apartment and showing me some of those wonderful routines you've been practicing?"

"Drop dead!" she said, and she didn't even bother to look at me while she said it.

So around ten that night I was sitting in my lonely apartment, listening to lonely music from my lonely hi-fi machine while I drank a lonely drink. The world was bleak and had shrunk into four lonely walls and I couldn't make up my mind whether to go out and get drunk or stay home and get drunk. Then the buzzer sounded.

I opened the door cautiously because who knows whose husband carries a long grudge? A pocket-sized Venus, with soft black hair that curled lovingly around her shoulders, looked up at me with a brilliant smile on her lovely face.

"Lieutenant Wheeler?" she asked in a soft, melodious drawl.

"That's me," I gurgled.

"I'm so glad I found you," she said calmly and pushed past me inside the apartment.

By the time I got back into the living room, she was sitting on the couch, her legs crossed carelessly so I could see their shapeliness a long way past the arbitrary hemline.

"I'm Jenny Carter," she said calmly, and took a deep breath that made her expensive cashmere sweater about twice as interesting as anything they got in the Extravaganza. "Annabelle won't believe me anyway when I tell her it didn't happen—so I figured I might just as well come over to your place and have it happen."

"Huh?" I gulped and stared down at her bug-eyed.

She reached out a casual hand and jerked me off balance so I collapsed on the couch beside her. Then she moved easily onto my lap and draped her arms firmly around my neck.

"Comfort me, Al Wheeler!" she said seriously. I think I'm going to enjoy it!"

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